Summer 8-2020

Acquiring Experiences: An Investigation of the Materialist in Liquid Consumption

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ACQUIRING EXPERIENCES: AN INVESTIGATION OF THE MATERIALIST IN LIQUID CONSUMPTION

by

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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Business Administration: Marketing Concentration

COLLEGE OF BUSINESS
LOUISIANA TECH UNIVERSITY

August 2020

LOUISIANA TECH UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL

June 18, 2020
Date of dissertation defense

We hereby recommend that the dissertation prepared by

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entitled **Acquiring Experiences: An Investigation of the Materialist in Liquid Consumption**

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Business Administration, Marketing Concentration

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GS Form 13a
(01/20)

ABSTRACT

Knowledge-based economies and digital disruption in Western societies have triggered significant changes in the way consumers purchase, communicate and maintain relationships. The shift in consumption patterns reflects a move from solid (physical, ownership-based) consumption to more liquid (ephemeral, access-based) consumption. Increased liquidity can affect need fulfillment and consumption goal achievement across individual values, such as materialism. Materialistic consumers obtain possessions to communicate a successful image, achieve happiness or find enjoyment. The dissertation asks, how are materialistic consumers meeting their needs in the digital realm as liquid consumption increases?

A mixed methods approach addresses the proposition that social media may allow consumers, including high materialists, to achieve certain consumption goals they once achieved with solid consumption. Qualitative depth interviews and quantitative cross-sectional data examine the degree to which Instagram followers experience parasocial relationships with influencers, connect with an influencer's human brand or feel a psychological sense of community among other followers. The studies also provide insight on whether followers who perceive the relationships and connections will likely purchase brands that influencers post. A final multi-group analysis addresses whether the rise of consumer self-definition through experiences prompts materialistic consumers to

participate in the activities and places they see influencers feature. Results reveal that engaging in parasocial relationships with influencers, connecting with an influencer's human brand and feeling a psychological sense of brand community among other followers all occur to some extent across individuals. The studies also suggest the occurrence of influencer-inspired purchases of both material and experiential nature. While the strength of a parasocial relationship fails to positively affect a follower's purchase intentions, self-human brand connection strongly influences both types of purchase intentions. Psychological sense of brand community positively influences a follower's material purchase intentions but not experiential purchase intentions. The extent to which a follower embraces materialism as a personal value makes little difference regarding whether relationships and connections with influencers increase the likelihood of a follower's material or experiential purchases. The dissertation extends the application of liquid consumption and lends insight to managers engaged in tactics such as influencer and experiential marketing.

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DEDICATION

To my parents, John and JoAnn Allen.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My dissertation reflects the valuable wisdom, compassion and experience of the many individuals who invested in me. First, I would like to thank Dr. Laura Flurry, my dissertation chair, for her infinite support throughout the process of completing my dissertation. Her analytical mind and intuitive nature helped to guide the evolution of my topic, from the earliest idea to the finished piece. When challenges arose and tasks became overwhelming, she lent the advice and encouragement I needed to continue. Laura had my back at every step, providing networking opportunities, sending helpful resources and supporting my data collection. She serves as a guiding light not only in my research but also in my teaching and in many other areas. I am truly grateful for everything she has done for me.

I would also like to thank my committee members for the time, energy and care they contributed to improve my research. Dr. Barry Babin dared me to think deeper, reminding me to question results and to examine concepts from every perspective. His advice on my analyses and results helped me tremendously. Beginning in theory class on my first day as a doctoral student, Barry has played an important role in preparing me to think like a researcher. Dr. Julie Moulard taught me about the importance of defining a construct, forming a conceptual model and organizing my thoughts clearly. Her creative advice on presenting my proposal helped me to effectively communicate my ideas.

Julie inspired me to pursue doctoral studies and enabled me to realize my love for learning. When I needed a role model for how to carry myself in front of an audience or a class, it was Julie who set the example. Lastly, Dr. Lauren Labrecque, always open to my ideas, enhanced my dissertation with her valuable feedback and encouraged me through her own work related to my topic. Wherever my thoughts led me, Lauren's thoughts travelled right along on the same plane. Though Lauren and I had only met virtually, she willingly dedicated time to critique my dissertation and attend my presentations.

As for all of my professors and colleagues in the Department of Marketing and Analysis, as well as throughout the College of Business and Louisiana Tech University, thank you for the ways in which you have shaped and inspired me. It takes a village, and I appreciate each one of you. My sincere hugs go to my cohort members who started the journey with me—Sabinah Wanjugu, Ellis Chefor, Amin Saleh, Randi Jiang, Sahar Farshadkhah and Shariful Islam. I couldn't have asked for better friends and colleagues. They are all dear to me. I must extend a special thanks to Sabinah, my office mate. She provided a listening ear when I wanted to vent, a calming presence when I became upset and a ready smile when I needed to laugh. In sharing a workspace together for the entire doctoral program, Sabinah has been with me through both the delightful and dreadful times.

Finally, I send my gratitude and love to my family for vicariously braving the doctoral journey alongside me. Thank you to my dad, who pushed me to keep my head up and to find optimism in the turmoil. Thank you to my mom, who asked for a draft of my dissertation so that she could read the entire copy and pose numerous points to challenge my rationale. Her consistent morning phone calls have made the difference between my

success and my failure in a multitude of ways. Thank you to my sister for listening to my research ideas and sharing the same passion for marketing. And thank you to my brother, who kept me smiling with his many impersonations and comedic stories. To God be the glory.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Modern American consumers share similar patterns in the way they navigate their everyday lives. Consumers live with significant others and frequently interact with many different friends. They have thousands of photos, a myriad of entertainment content and a library of books. They use cars to travel to work and come home at the end of the day to chic spaces. However, an unrealized difference exists. If some consumers were to abandon the dwellings, automobiles, relationships and belongings, no official documentation, tangible evidence or physical magnitude of the losses would exist, for the consumers own and attach themselves to very little. Value creation between consumers and offerings remains rented and accessed, perpetually hanging on the edge of easy discontinuation. Some observing the new lifestyle through traditional lenses may see a consumer's investments as unstable and uncertain. Others taking a refreshed view may see a consumer's consumption choices as liberating. Through the consumer's eyes, consumption is neither reduced nor deprived—it's simply *liquid*.

Background

Liquid consumption entails consuming value offerings through means other than handling tangible items. Liquid consumption involves a change from solid,

ownership-based items to ephemeral, access-based forms. Liquid consumption emerges as a natural byproduct of cultural trends, like instant gratification and lack of commitment, and the change continues to transform homes, workspaces and communities. Couples live in single-family households by way of cohabiting rather than by marriage. For instance, 35 percent of all unmarried parents were cohabiting in 2017, up from 20 percent in 1997 (Cilluffo & Cohn, 2019). Friends stay connected by way of electronic messages rather than by in-person dates. A company may employ many individuals that never step foot inside an office because they all work from elsewhere, accessing files on the cloud and communicating through Slack at any time of the day or night. New-fashioned flexibility frees employees who would traditionally be anchored to an office building, as many workplaces now allow employees to take unlimited vacation days and work remotely from home (Inc, 2019).

Liquidity has infiltrated not only the ways in which consumers execute tasks and express behaviors (a concept called liquid practices) but also the objects consumers purchase. Companies have shifted the versions of value offerings from physical products to virtual services. Creators have embraced dematerialization, a concept that involves using fewer or no materials to achieve equal or increased functionality. Software as a service, video conferences and leases have increasingly replaced physical copies, coffee shop meetings and mortgages. The instant gratification of access has become second nature to younger generations, enabling consumers to get immediate satisfaction. Rather than waiting or saving, consumers share or gain access to goods they are unable to own. All in all, solid consumption is not completely disappearing, but liquid consumption is certainly increasing.

The growing prevalence of liquid consumption and liquid practices undoubtedly change the way consumers fulfill needs. Needs are never satisfied. When one need is satisfied, another arises. Consumers can meet the same need in multiple ways by achieving different goals. Liquid consumption and liquid practices that are fleeting and access-based pose an easier, faster way to meet needs and move on to more consumption for further need fulfillment. Though liquid consumption affects all consumers to some extent, liquidity effects between generations may certainly differ. Young consumers with freshly printed college diplomas and entry-level positions often envision big dreams, yet they find themselves facing mountains much larger than what their parents set out to climb at the same age. Rising costs of living and looming student loan debt now prompt consumers in their 20s to seek alternative ways to meet basic personal needs without straying too far from the lifestyle standards enjoyed by many Americans. Consumers with vivid memories of their parents struggling to make payments during the Great Recession may remain hesitant to buy their first homes, even after reaching financial capabilities to make such investments.

Social media offers another way through which liquid consumption and liquid practices manifest themselves. Social media platforms typically require no monetary commitment for basic usage, instead accepting payment through surrendered consumer data. Social media enable consumers to express themselves online through personal profiles, access friends and family, and share photos and information with others, all by using a single device. The capabilities and encounters on social media allow consumers to meet interrelated needs in different ways. For instance, consumers can meet social needs through either connecting with friends or interacting with other followers in

communities. In another instance, consumers can meet self-esteem needs by using content to either positively influence followers or to receive positive feedback and encouragement from followers.

Consumers can also meet needs through interactions with brands on social media. The myriad of marketing capabilities on social media has initiated a fight for consumer attention through digital touchpoints. Marketers can execute content marketing and social commerce strategies to reach consumers at any stage of their purchasing journeys. A Hootsuite article reported that, as of March 2019, 60 percent of Instagram users search for products and make new discoveries using the platform (Clarke, 2019). Social media platforms like Instagram have also become a popular mechanism for influencer marketing. Companies pay Instagram influencers to feature particular products, services and experiences on their personal profiles. Consumers meeting their needs by following influencers to obtain information, entertainment or belongingness in a community may also be persuaded to purchase offerings they see the influencer feature.

With the rise of social media platforms, influencers and the ease of connectivity, consumers typically unassociated with relational aspects, such as consumers exhibiting a high degree of materialism, may engage with online entities in ways from which they would have traditionally refrained (Pieters, 2013). Individual differences like materialism may pose a challenge for marketers as they grapple with ways to effectively communicate value to high materialists in an increasingly liquid marketplace. Consumers who rely on material goods to restore order, maintain certainty and construct their own identities may find themselves coping through new modes of consumption, including through their communication on social media.

Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

Consumers may all have the same needs, but they may be motivated to achieve different goals in order to meet their needs, depending on individual differences in personal values. Personal values among consumer's guide consumption behavior, including one's preferences for solid and liquid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). The current conceptual framework proposes a link between the personal value of materialism and liquid consumption, specifically in the context of influencer marketing on social media.

By gaining insight on consumer perceptions of social media influencers, managers can better provide consumers with opportunities to realize the benefits of engagement in liquid consumption, eventually leading to meaningful outcomes for brands. For instance, consumers may be more likely to form parasocial relationships with influencers as a substitute for relationships with offline friends. Consumers may be more likely to feel a sense of belongingness with other followers in an influencer's brand community. Also, consumers may be more likely to identify with an influencer due to similar interests. When a consumer sees an influencer feature a product or experience, an established relationship with the influencer and other followers may hold considerable weight in one's decision to make a material or experiential purchase.

An issue of the current research surrounds the notion that ever-increasing liquid consumption poses a transitioning environment for consumers with strong preferences for solid consumption. Some have argued that personal values such as materialism may conflict with liquid consumption and dematerialization (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). High materialists traditionally value products to achieve certainty, control and a host of other

positive outcomes. A rise in liquid consumption, including consumption on social media, may enable high materialists to successfully achieve consumption goals without physical products. Tendencies of materialistic individuals, such as self-centeredness, uncertainty intolerance, strong usage of brands for self-identity construction, and the tendency to substitute products for interpersonal relationships, may demonstrate stronger responses to the proposed relationships of the current research. For instance, high materialists may be more likely to experience parasocial relationships with influencers due to the lack of commitment typically required in offline relationships. High materialists may be more likely to identify with influencers who display success, often shown in the form of follower quantity. High materialists aiming to maintain a self-identity around the successful human brand of an influencer may also feel a sense of belongingness with other followers.

Finally, influencer-follower relationships, along with the capabilities of social media platforms, may play a role in high materialists' consumption of experiences. Previous marketing literature has understood high materialists to have a strong preference for tangible products rather than intangible experiences. However, liquid consumption on social media now provides a way for consumers to store or acquire experiences. For high materialists, liquid consumption means they can acquire experiences just as they do products, documenting the experiences with pictures and posting them on social media to reinforce a specific self-identity. By not only buying products but also engaging in experiences that influencers post, high materialists can develop and maintain their self-identities with both products and experiences.

The current research aims to gather support for social media's ability to provide digital acquisition opportunities for high materialists. By gaining further insight on high materialists' view of online relationships and collectable experiences, social media developers and managers can optimize platforms for acquiring and storing digital objects, especially objects that carry symbolic meaning. Experiential content has been shown to arouse the most envy from followers who view the content (Lin, van de Ven & Utz, 2018). Experiential consumption can be documented and posted for acquiring "likes" and catching the attention of successful followers. The inclination for other followers to "like" experiential content, rather than content centered on material products, may boost the preferences for experiential purchases by high materialists.

The examination of experiential preferences can provide greater support for managers selling experiences rather than material products. By offering opportunities and incentives for consumers to document their experiential purchases, such as custom geotags, areas for picture taking and campaigns calling for consumers to share stories, managers may be more likely to appeal to high materialists. The current research proposes that, with the potential to impress others, acquire digital possessions and associate with successful followers, high materialists may be more inclined to building a collection of experiences and associating with desirable influencers. The current research aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How are high materialists meeting their needs in the digital realm as liquid consumption increases?

RQ2: How do relationships and communities on social media influence the purchase intentions of high materialists?

Managerial Importance

The current research addresses several existing problems for managers. First, managers must still market to high materialists in the face of rising liquid consumption. Economic forces against consumers in their 20s and 30s have prompted an increase in liquid lifestyles. As a result, generational circumstances may drive the majority of engagement in liquid consumption, with younger consumers opting for more access-based purchases. However, increasing liquidity in general reaches many consumers, regardless of age. The research provides a closer look for managers, especially managers marketing services and experiences, at the ways in which high materialists consider possessions across generations. Materialistic consumption may appear differently for younger generations, whose members may be forming self-identities based more on what they do, not on what they own. The managerial contribution involves proposing a new path for managers engaged in influencer marketing. The current research expects to demonstrate that managers can appeal to high materialists by either enhancing branded material products with experiential elements or by using influencer marketing to feature branded experiences.

Theoretical Importance

The current research addresses several existing literature gaps. First, the research examines materialism in the realm of liquid consumption, as no known studies have taken the task of finding how high materialists may cope with liquid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Second, the research addresses high materialists and their regard for online brand communities. Calls for further research on the aspect of high materialists in

brand communities have been posed as well, yet no known studies have been pursued (Kamboj & Rahman, 2017).

The first theoretical contribution involves the proposal of a different lens through which one can view materialistic consumption. The current research adds several more planks to the emerging bridge connecting liquid consumption, experiences and materialistic consumption. (Keinan & Kivetz, 2010; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012, 2017). The second contribution resides in the proposal that high materialists may move from connecting with object brands to connecting with human brands, shifting to a more Gestalt view of brands (Escalas & Bettman, 2003, 2017; Schmitt, 2012). Additionally, the current research proposes that online brand communities can surround human brands. Research has acknowledged human brand communities for entities like professional athletes, but the concept has not been examined in the context of social media influencers (Carlson & Donavan, 2013). The third contribution lies in the proposed idea that online communities may be important to high materialists, who are traditionally known to focus on individualistic values rather than on collective values, through association with others to form self-identities (Claxton & Murray, 1994; Toma, 2018).

Dissertation Organization

The current research follows a five-part format. Chapter 1 provided an overview of the present state of the literature, research questions and proposed contributions. Chapter 2 provides a thorough review of the literature surrounding the way in which the connections among consumers, influencers and human brand communities drive material and experiential purchases. Chapter 3 presents the mixed methods research design, along with the preliminary qualitative research analysis and results. Chapter 4 follows with the

analysis and results of the quantitative study. Chapter 5 concludes the research with discussion, managerial implications, limitations and future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The current dissertation examines the relationships among high materialists and the ways in which various facets of their encounters with social media influencers impact both their material and experiential purchase intentions. The following literature review assesses both classic and recent research findings related to materialism, social media, parasocial relationships, human-brand identification, self-brand connection and brand communities. The interwoven principles of liquid consumption, uses and gratifications theory, homophily theory, social identity theory and social comparison theory provide foundations that reinforce each part of the proposed framework. Relevant research questions and hypotheses, placed throughout the review, follow corresponding portions that explain the logic for each construct in sequential order. The concluding section presents academic and managerial implications of the proposed relationships.

Influencer Marketing

In the midst of digital disruption, the way brands market products and services over various online channels has greatly changed the marketing game. Marketing in the digital world has given way to the omnichannel marketing strategy, the digital customer journey and the always –on methodology (Zahav & Roberts, 2018). Firms are leveraging social media channels to connect with consumers, either directly through brand pages or

indirectly through influencer marketing. Influencer marketing is a strategy involving the communication of brands to consumers using an independent person with credibility, an established following and the authority to influence potential customers (Brown & Hayes, 2008; Audrezet, De Kerviler & Moulard, 2018). Sudha and Sheena (2017) define the strategy as "a process of identifying and activating individuals who have an influence over a specific target audience or medium, in order to be part of a brand's campaign towards increased reach, sales, or engagement." Influencer marketing skyrocketed in 2018, growing by more than 39 percent relative to the amount of sponsored posts on Instagram (Klear, 2019).

Through content like still images, videos and GIFs, influencers provide value that satisfies follower needs for information, emotional support and entertainment. An influencer's content can be accessed anywhere at any time. By nature, it is typically important that an influencer remain involved in associated social media communities and accessible to his or her followers (Vaynerchuk, 2017). The entrepreneurial, self-made way of gaining traction on social media, along with the practice of posting content about one's everyday life, reduces the perceived power distance between influencers and followers. The integration of product and service brands in the text and images of posts allows followers to link directly to a product page for offerings that spark their interests. Commenting and direct messaging capabilities enable followers to send feedback and questions to influencers who can then strengthen their audience relationships by reciprocating with personalized responses. Compared to the traditional context of celebrities on television or in a magazine, one could argue that influencers are leading consumers to interpret brands and interact with other followers in new ways.

Proposed Conceptual Framework

The proposed conceptual framework provides an overview of the way consumers use social media to form relationships with influencers, find belongingness through brand communities and receive information from referent others regarding future purchases. Social media influencers can serve as human brands that provide a model for consumption-related behavior. Some followers may form connections and perceive intimate bonds with influencers, as well as feel a sense of community among other followers whom they have never formally met. Follower bonds may strengthen one's likelihood to purchase material goods and life experiences after consuming influencer content that features the target purchase.

The conceptual framework acknowledges that social media influencers form relationships with followers and feature both material and experiential aspects of their daily lives. In accordance with the conceptual framework, the current research will examine how high materialists perceive their relationships with influencers and other followers, as well as how influencer content shapes consumer intentions to make both material and experiential purchases. The objective of the current research remains twofold. First, the research will examine how follower-influencer relationships affect a follower's material and experiential purchase intentions. Second, the research will examine the ways in which high materialists fulfill needs and achieve consumption goals on social media to establish a connection between materialism and the benefits of liquid consumption and practices.

Liquid Consumption

The current research surrounds the essence of consumption, defined as "the process by which consumers use goods, services, or ideas and transform the experience into value" (Babin & Harris, 2018, pg. 6). Murphy and Enis (1986) relatedly include goods, services and ideas in the modern description of the term *product*, defined as a "bundle of utilities...that is expected to provide satisfaction" (pg. 25). In other words, a product comprises different attributes, such as capabilities, qualities and processes, from which a consumer can derive value through product usage (Murphy & Enis, 1986). A consumer's desire for the product stems not from its attributes but rather from the benefits that the attribute assemblage provides (Murphy & Enis, 1986). A fitness center as a product, for instance, offers attributes expressed in both physical forms (such as an enclosed workout area with free weights) and intangible forms (such as aerobics classes and different schools of thought on muscle training).

Another lens through which one can view consumption places the way one consumes a product on a solid-liquid continuum. The enduring, ownership-based way to consume can be described as "solid," reflecting stability and certainty of control (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). A second, more modern sense of consumption has arisen with a decrease in industrial production and an emergence of digital and knowledge-based economies. The inversely moving forces brought about a shift in the way people store goods and entertain themselves—a way described as "liquid" (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Liquid consumption is defined as "ephemeral, access based and dematerialized" (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). For instance, one may view attending a yoga class at a fitness center as more solid than exercising at home while watching a YouTube video of a yoga

instructor, which may be relatively viewed as more liquid. Both options contain goods (mats and blocks), services (class instruction) and ideas (mindful living philosophies). For some consumers, consuming a yoga class in a more liquid fashion (practicing yoga alone, anywhere at any time, by a video that can be simultaneously accessed by many other people, each potentially in solitude as well) may offer greater value than a class that requires one to arrive at a certain time and place with other committed yogis.

The current research argues that the degree of liquidity in certain contexts continues to drastically change, so much that consumers who have formerly placed emphasis on the value of the solid consumption of products may be increasingly placing emphasis on the liquid consumption of products instead. The context under study surrounds social media, where liquidity thrives in relationships, self-identities, digital objects and experiential collections. At the publication time of Murphy and Enis (1986), experiences could be captured by photographs to preserve memories for a later time of reflection. One can engage in the same practice today; however, the maintenance of social media narratives adds another expected benefit and motivation for participating in and capturing an experience—the co-creation of value in the digital realm.

Service-dominant logic involves the co-creation of value between producers and consumers, along with the overall shift in focus from tangible goods to intangible knowledge and practices (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Resources are not necessarily tangible products that already exist; resources become after a human being acts on or uses them (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Specifically, one can use operant resources (intangible elements such as skills, processes and relationships) to act on operand resources (tangible elements such as raw materials) (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). A service-centered view dictates the

inclusion of not only goods as resources but also experiences, ideas, information and any other immaterial product as resources that can be bundled to provide value (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). On social media, liquid resources replace solid resources in the form of digital images, text and videos that consumers can use to build self-identities. Social media platforms allow users to co-create value with filtering and editing tools for self-expression and accessibility to millions of other users for network building. The value derived from a platform largely depends on the actions of each user, including posting content that will position one positively in the eyes of his or her followers. The focus of social media content echoes the work of Van Boven and Gilovich (2003) in that *to do* remains more en vogue than *to have*. Products each contain a bundle of attributes, but the practices by which a consumer co-creates value with the attributes have changed.

The Rise of Liquid Consumption

A growing liquid consumption now exists alongside solid consumption, gradually overtaking facets of work, play and overall living. The rapid pace of digital transformation has uprooted the comfort of stability (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Dematerialization, a process in which a consumer can receive full functionality of a product or service using little to no materials, has resulted in the production of lighter, more portable physical products and accessed-based, intangible products (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Digital calendars and cloud-based storage systems have replaced notepads and Rolodexes in workspaces. Copies of movies and games no longer collect dust on the shelves of a media center; consumers now access entertainment content from Internet-based services by subscription.

Many physical products in the liquid realm now operate on a foundation of accessibility (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). The accessibility of physical products expresses instrumental rationality, a component of liquid modernity that involves solving problems in the most efficient and cost-effective ways (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). For instance, some of the tangibility left in the consumer market is now rented or shared. Consumers offer their cars to drive others through ridesharing and their homes to house travelers through home sharing. The trend of intangibility is most salient in cities such as Los Angeles, where consumers rent beds tucked away in pods and share a bathroom and kitchen with fellow residents (Sanders, 2019). Consumers work remotely from laptops at coworking spaces during the day rather than travelling to a static location for a specific company (Sanders, 2019). From a broad perspective, Millennial consumers spend almost half of their annual income on renting rather than on mortgage payments, a trend different from previous generations (Sarac, 2018). Some consumers in their 20s are striving to pay off looming student loan debt, with more than half of consumers in the home buying market under the age of 36 attributing closing delays to student loans (Hankin, 2019). Other consumers may have witnessed their parents struggle to keep their homes and cars during the Great Recession in 2008, encouraging them to shy away from buying properties and making other large material investments. However, reasons differ amongst consumers who have voluntarily relinquished their tangible possessions (Sanders, 2019). While some consumers may rent and share to combat financial hardships, other consumers opt in for enjoyment or to replace corporate transactions with more peer-to-peer exchanges (Sanders, 2019). Further, consumers within the sharing

realm still have “stuff”—it is just in the form of digital artifacts and experiences (Sanders, 2019).

Whether younger consumers will continue to lead renting and sharing lifestyles in the latter part of their lives remains difficult to pinpoint. Either way, current consumption patterns communicate that access, not ownership, is the dominant paradigm. The priority shift arguably challenges the ways in which consumers traditionally communicate elements like success. For instance, if an S-class Mercedes-Benz model is a driverless car operated by a ridesharing company, what does it mean in the absence of ownership? In a general sense, how do consumers cope with consumption changes when the decrease in solidity becomes pervasive to their self-identities? The ultimate issue lies in whether consumers can still achieve their materialistic goals, which in turn satisfies their needs, in a liquid world.

Liquid Consumption and Materialism

The use of liquid possessions to fulfill one’s needs prompts an intriguing look at one particular profile—the high materialist. Questions surrounding liquid consumption, materialistic goals and coping strategies have been posed in several conceptual articles involving dematerialization and digitality (Belk, 2013; Kubat, 2018). Kubat (2018) found that consumers with extrinsic goals were more willing to pay for access-based digital possessions, such as a subscription for access to digital music. Though digital acquisition relative to materialistic goals continues to be explored, quite a few researchers have presented conceptual thoughts on the valence of liquidity in the eyes of high materialists. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) emphasize that liquid consumption remains a concerning rather than celebratory occurrence that may be negative for consumers, including

consumers who are materialistic. The notion can be examined by considering consumer needs, the goals consumers achieve to fulfill the needs and the personal values that guide consumer behavior. Consumers can share a given need, yet consumers may differ in the consumption goals they aim to achieve to fulfill the need (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019). Liquid consumption may affect the way goals are achieved by consumers who embrace materialism as a value to meet their needs.

First, liquid modernity is associated with risk and uncertainty, two characteristics that usually prompt high materialists to find comfort through solid acquisition (Rindfleisch et al., 2009; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Next, consumers typically use lasting hedonic products for forming identities rather than the temporary utilitarian products of liquid consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). The temporary nature of liquid consumption, along with its result in owning fewer tangible possessions, may pose a caveat for high materialists, who tend to rely heavily on material product acquisition to achieve personal goals. In addition, liquid consumption accentuates individualization, a state in which one moves from the collective realm to isolation (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). With increased individualization, one makes decisions and navigates life on his or her own, increasing the feeling of insecurity (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017).

Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) also argue that liquid consumption could, in some ways, be positive for high materialists. The access-based nature of liquid consumption allows for quickened accumulation of items, meaning high materialists can acquire the next best items faster (Holt, 1995; Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). A component of liquid modernity known as the fragmentation of life and identity drives the short-term use and flexible disposal of elements in return for continuous upgraded versions (Bardhi &

Eckhardt, 2017). Accessing can also allow high materialists to use luxury items they cannot afford to own (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012, 2017). High materialists have been found to drift away from collective values to practice more self-focused values, leading one to believe that an environment of increased individualization may not differ much from the environment in which high materialists function in the solid world (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002).

A New View of Liquidity

Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) argue that liquid consumption conflicts with Richins and Dawson's (1992) view of materialism, including the three materialistic dimensions of acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness and possession-defined success. The current research aims to counter the argument by considering the relativity of an entity's perceived liquidity. A consumer perceives the degree of solidity or liquidity in an entity based on the entity's relevance to oneself (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). The more self-relevant an entity, the more solid a consumer's perceptions of the entity (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). The point of self-relevance suggests that (1) the liquidity of any given entity is relative and (2) a consumer will adapt to growing liquidity by adjusting his or her perceptions of what qualifies as solid. Therefore, when a consumer's choices are narrowed to include products that are mostly or solely liquid, self-relevance may still mediate the relationship between a product and the degree to which a consumer integrates the product into the extended self.

The extended self is defined as a sense of self constructed from possession-based meaning that is "[not] limited to external objects and personal possessions, but also includes persons, places, and group possessions as well as such possessions as body parts

and vital organs" (Belk, 1988, pg. 140). In other words, a consumer may see himself, along with his body, belongings, friends and family, as a collection of meaningful parts that make him who he is (Belk 1988). The relativity of an entity's liquidity seamlessly integrates Richins and Dawson's (1992) three materialistic dimensions into the arena of liquid consumption, as a high materialist may acquire digital objects and experiences in place of physical objects.

One could argue that high materialists can continue acquisition centrality by way of liquid consumption, including through digital hoarding and quantifying the self through social media feedback. Acquisition as a pursuit of happiness can also manifest itself in liquid consumption through, for example, experiential consumption. Though high materialists typically regard material possessions as more self-defining than life experiences, Carter and Gilovich (2012) found that high materialists considered experiential purchases to be equally linked to their self-concepts.

As digital elements come to be viewed as more solid, consumers may begin to use digital elements to form and communicate their self-identities, which largely speaks to materialism in the form of acquiring to build a successful image. Schau and Gilly (2003) found evidence of self-presentation efforts through digital collages on personal websites created in the turn of the 21st century. Participants communicated themselves by creating content about their milestones, interests, aspirations and passions (Schau & Gilly, 2003). As consumers now construct their identities online through social media, the extended self continues to become a digital extended self, incorporating the differences that have arisen in creating one's self-identity in a digital world (Belk, 2013).

Perhaps the most extensive and impressive digital platforms on which consumers currently form identities are social media. Social media are defined as "internet-based, disentrained, and persistent channels of mass personal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content" (Carr & Hayes, 2015, p. 49). Users typically view social media platforms as storage units for digital possessions, such as images and status updates, rather than as digital possessions themselves (Cushing, 2013). Current popular channels such as Instagram can be used in a myriad of ways to communicate lifestyles and beliefs through images and videos. Instagram is emblematic of social media platforms used for communicating and constructing the digital self (Belk, 2013). Users can edit content before posting to achieve a desired look, follow an array of well-known individuals to make valuable connections, tag the brands they own to emphasize their association with certain products and note the locations they visit to construct a self-identity through experiences.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The practice of using social media for need fulfillment is grounded in uses and gratifications theory (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973). Uses and gratifications theory posits that consumers may use the same medium to fulfill many different needs, depending on the individual characteristics of the user (Katz et al., 1973). Further, certain media can satisfy particular needs better than others; for instance, Katz et al. (1973) suggest that books and movies satisfy the needs of self-fulfillment through introspective means. In other words, books and movies can help to connect a consumer with oneself, allowing him or her to engage in self-definition and consume content that can help one to

achieve his or her full potential. Others may use certain media to satisfy informational needs.

Toma (2018) states that media plays a remarkable role in giving meaning to one's social identity, suggesting that one can choose to use certain media to symbolize one's social status, showcase activity participation and initiate interpersonal interaction. Specifically, on social media platforms, posting content containing relevant activities and objects can help users communicate their self-identities (Duan & Dholakia, 2017). Regularly giving someone positive feedback can serve as a reminder in case the sender may need a future favor or want to rekindle a relationship with the receiver (Hayes, Carr & Wohn, 2016b). Specifically, high materialists may use social media to fulfill personal goals of acquisition through features that allow them to form relationships and associate with successful others, along with acquiring followers, "likes" and other digital possessions. Materialists may use social media to aid them in forming self-identities through connections with certain others. Overall, materialism influences a difference in how one may attempt to satisfy needs in liquid consumption due to the high materialist's strong traditional roots in solid consumption.

Concluding Thoughts

Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) argue that the lens of liquid consumption does not align with the value of materialism proposed by Richins and Dawson (1992). Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) suggest that liquid consumption places accessing and circulating possessions over acquiring and owning possessions, derailing any basis for acquisition-focused materialism. While the current research agrees with many principles of liquid consumption, the current research also proposes that by broadening one's perspective on

acquisition, success and happiness, Richins and Dawson's (1992) three materialism dimensions may apply quite well to a digital environment in the midst of growing liquidity. For instance, staying active on social media may be viewed as a form of consumption that furthers materialism in an intangible way. The current research argues that while liquid consumption may lead some consumers to emphasize use value, liquid consumption can still enable consumers to fulfill identity needs through relationships with both brands and consumers. High materialists may use connections with people to enhance their self-identities. They may form perceived friendships with unknown users and with users who may only be offline acquaintances for affiliation and belongingness. They may also acquire digital possessions. Thus, the current research aims to answer:

RQ1: How are high materialists meeting their needs in the digital realm as liquid consumption increases?

Social Media Influencers

The current research examines the context of influencer marketing on social media through the lens of liquid consumption. Social media influencers play a powerful role in consumer decision making regarding opinions and purchases (Zeljko, Jakovic & Strugar, 2018). A social media influencer is defined as an "independent third party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media" (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Freberg, 2011, pg. 90). Using the two-step communication model, brands can reach consumers by paying social media users with large followings to feature products on content pieces like images, videos and blogs (Zelijko et al., 2018). Marketing through social media influencers can arguably be more successful than direct communication from brands because influencers are seen as

"everyday people" who are authentic, bear credibility and remain accessible to followers (Abidin, 2015).

With rapidly changing consumer trends and platform features, the concept of an influencer can be elusive and ever-changing, as illustrated by the varying influencer definitions displayed in Table 2-1. For social media users, recognizing someone as a social media influencer tends to be easier to do than to describe. Detailed points based on platform functionality or content trends can pose difficulty in defining the term *influencer*. A social media user can perceive an influencer to comprise many different characteristics based on his or her perceptions. For instance, Kylie Jenner, a popular beauty influencer on Instagram, has millions of followers, regularly posts content and engages in sponsored partnerships with relevant brands (Jenner, 2019). She operates in a strong position to market products and services to many followers at once. However, contrary to Kylie Jenner and her audience, other influencers may only have 100,000 followers and create content for those who are interested in a niche fashion trend. While Kylie Jenner has millions of followers consuming her content, the niche influencer may have a smaller quantity of valuable consumers passionately engaging and joining a conversation. Before studying the potentially powerful outcomes of interactions among influencers and followers, the current research will first examine the ways in which previous literature defines and categorizes influencers.

Table 2-1

Definitions of Influencer

Author(s)	Definition
Abidin (2015)	“Influencers are every day, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in digital and physical spaces, and monetize their following by integrating “advertorials” into their blog or social media posts.”
Brown and Hayes (2008)	“A third party who significantly shapes the customer’s purchasing decision, but may never be accountable for it.”
Chae (2018)	"Referred to as a micro-celebrity, this new type of celebrity involves the practice of self-presentation on social media, which is accomplished by the creation of one’s own online image and the use of that image to attract attention and a large number of followers…often called social media influencers (influencers)."
De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017)	"...people who built a large network of followers, and are regarded as trusted tastemakers in one or several niches..."
Ewers (2017)	"‘Regular’ people, who built up a large community on their social media platforms or blogs, increasingly gain a form of celebrity status simply through their online activities. Their wide reach enables them to get in touch with and influence a great audience, which is why they are also referred to as influencers (Uzunoğlu & Kip, 2014)."
Freberg, Graham, McGaughey and Freberg (2011)	“Social media influencers (SMIs) represent a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media.”
Holmes (2018)	"An influencer can be a blogger, a YouTube video star or someone who posts regularly on social media."
Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) (2018)	“…have the potential to create engagement, drive conversation and/or sell products/services with the intended target audience. These individuals can range from being celebrities to more micro-targeted professional or non-professional ‘peers’…”
Lungeanu and Parisi (2018)	"On Instagram, the most popular users who are able to exert a major influence over other users are called ‘influencers’..."
Sudha and Sheena (2017)	“…entities ‘who have an influence over a specific online target audience or medium’ that can be activated by brands via sponsoring their content or interactions with their audience ‘to increase reach, sales and engagement’ through positive association.”
Zeljko, Jakovic and Strugar (2018)	“Influencers are individuals who are extremely exposed in the digital world of social networks. These are people who have a significant influence on public decisions regarding the products they buy, the services they use, and the initiatives they are supporting. They represent how brands can connect with their target groups through a voice that potential users of products or services trust."

Defining Influencer

One could argue that previous literature has somewhat worsened the clarity surrounding the composition of an influencer. Academic authors sometimes use the terms influencer, celebrity and opinion leader to denote individuals in seemingly similar social standings. As for the term *influencer*, some consider a large following to be a necessary precursor to influencer status. For instance, Abidin (2015) classifies influencers as social media users who "accumulate a relatively large following," and Ioanid and Militaru (2015) consider a high amount of followers to be a defining characteristic of social media influencers. The emphasis placed by marketers on follower quantity directly aligns with the popular objective of reaching a high number of consumers with a piece of content (Brown & Fiorella, 2013; Childers, Lemon & Hoy, 2018). However, inadequacies in measuring a brand's social media success by follower count or paralinguistic digital affordances (e.g. "likes"), such as those exposed by Syrdal and Briggs (2018), have spurred firms to consider implementing the cliché of "quality over quantity" in their influencer marketing strategies. Freberg et al. (2011) suggests that basing an influencer's worth on the number of views, content shares or followers should stand as a starting point rather than an end solution. Messages pushed by digital marketing influencers like Gary Vaynerchuk aim to inspire firms to reallocate attention to social media users with smaller followings, powerful voices and greater anticipated return on investment (Vaynerchuk, 2019).

The capabilities provided by social media platforms further exacerbate the confusion surrounding the term *influencer*. Any human being can create a free social media account and post content with a mobile device. Influencers on social media can

accentuate the association of a brand with a certain lifestyle at a rate unparalleled by the capabilities of traditional endorsements on television and in print. By tagging brands in posts, which includes adding a name label and link to the brand's Instagram profile within an image or listing the brand's handle in the caption, influencers instantly connect followers with brands (Childers et al., 2018). The monetization structure for paying influencers to feature products on social media profiles also differs from traditional endorsement methods. Influencers sign agreements with brands or agencies to post a certain amount of content pieces during a designated time period (Biaudet, 2017). Though brands may approve content or monitor an entire campaign to ensure a brand is appropriately communicated, influencers can maintain much control over the creativity and dissemination of the content (Biaudet, 2017; Childers et al., 2018). When working with influencers, campaign managers must balance between granting too much freedom, which could blur objectives, and setting too many restrictions, which could weaken the influencer's authenticity (Biaudet, 2017). All in all, social media platforms offer influencers an array of opportunities regarding ways in which they can express themselves, feature brands and reach followers, consequently affecting awareness, sales and other influencer marketing objectives. The current research first reviews previous literature on the characteristics of influencers, opinion leaders and celebrities before examining the broader issue of an influencer's role in consumer need fulfillment.

Mega, Macro and Micro Influencers

The emergence of prefixes like "macro" and "micro" has widened the continuum of follower quantity-based categories for social media influencers. However, the definitions imposed on various areas of the continuum remain varied and unclear. Brown

and Fiorella (2013) propose differences between macro and micro influencers in regards to their level of influence over others in their social networks. *Macro influencers* are defined as "individuals, businesses or media with a large, active social following comprised of people with whom they have a loosely defined or unknown relationship" (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, pg. 114). For instance, macro influencers in the digital realm once included social media users, including celebrities and popular bloggers, with high scores on a now-defunct mobile application called Klout (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). *Micro influencers* are defined as "individuals within a consumer's social graph, whose commentary, based on the personal nature of their relationship and communications, has a direct impact on the behavior of that consumer" (Brown & Fiorella, 2013, pg. 114). Brown and Fiorella (2013) classify friends and family as micro influencers, but the closeness a consumer feels toward an individual does not mean he or she will influence the consumer in every context. Rather, individuals who are most important to a consumer during the purchase process become the micro influencers (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). For instance, micro influencers could be other users within an online forum who have expertise to answer questions or give advice about products and services (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). Managers view macro influencers as the conversation drivers of micro influencers, with the synergy of both influencer types driving consumer purchase decisions (Brown & Fiorella, 2013).

An influencer's macro/micro status has been shown to correlate with influencer characteristics and behaviors. First, macro influencers tend to vary in their amounts of engagement with followers, while micro influencers are more likely to exhibit higher amounts of engagement with followers (Fernandes, 2018; Holmes, 2018). Second,

managers view micro influencers as more economical endorsers compared to macro influencers, who may charge much more for endorsement deals due to their capability of reaching a high amount of consumers (Holmes, 2018). Finally, macro and micro influencers differ in the number of users who follow them, though no absolute lines exist between each influencer type relative to follower quantity. For instance, Fernandes (2018) classifies macro influencers as having more than 500,000 followers and a micro influencer as having 500,000 or fewer followers. Holmes (2018) designates even smaller follower quantities for micro influencers, presenting ranges such as 1,000 to 100,000 followers and 25,000 to 250,000 followers. Gottbrecht (2016) used three categories (micro, macro and mega) to classify influencers based on follower quantity. Micro influencers, including employees and everyday consumers, have about 500 to 10,000 followers, while macro influencers, including executives and bloggers, have 10,000 to 1 million followers (Gottbrecht, 2016). Mega influencers, such as celebrities, athletes and social media stars, boast at least one million followers (Gottbrecht, 2016).

An influencer's macro/micro status can also correlate with different characteristics, perceptions and behaviors among followers. First, followers tend to admire or emulate macro influencers, whereas followers tend to identify with micro influencers (Bernazzani, 2017; Fernandes, 2018). Second, micro influencers typically serve followers who have niche interests or activities (Fernandes, 2018). De Veirman, Cauberghe and Hudders (2017) found that higher follower numbers lead to greater perceived popularity, perceived opinion leadership and likeability of the influencer. Influencers with a lower amount of followers hold an advantage when featuring atypical products, which are perceived as more unique and result in a more positive attitude

toward the featured brand (De Veirman et al., 2017). In a broad sense, a product's exclusivity decreases as its market share or volume of interested consumer's increases, providing a possible explanation for decreased iniquity in products featured by influencers with a greater number of followers (De Veirman et al., 2017). Though the fictitious influencers in all experimental conditions would likely be recognized as micro, De Veirman et al. (2017)'s studies suggest that follower quantity can affect follower perceptions of both an influencer and the product or brand an influencer features.

Additionally, follower quantity has been shown to affect consumer perceptions of endorsed luxury brands. An influencer's popularity does not affect the strength of a luxury product match-up, which involves the congruence between an influencer's content and the meaning represented by the endorsed brand (Fernandes, 2018). However, a macro influencer's endorsement can significantly increase the status one perceives of an endorsed luxury brand or product compared to when the same brand or product is endorsed by a micro influencer (Fernandes, 2018). Further, luxury brand or product endorsements by macro influencers positively affect one's willingness to pay a premium price significantly more than endorsements by micro influencers (Fernandes, 2018). Fernandes' (2018) findings counter those of McCracken (1989), who theorized that an endorser's popularity would not affect perceived brand or product meaning.

Opinion Leaders

The term *opinion leader* also arises in some studies on social media influencers. An opinion leader is defined as someone who has the "ability to influence other individuals' attitudes or overt behavior in a desired way in a particular domain and plays the role of social identity function" (Grewal et al., 2000; Jin & Ryu, 2018, pg. 422).

Opinion leaders include peers and consumers who initiate online word of mouth about a product or brand (Jin & Ryu, 2018). Childers (1986) refined an early measurement of opinion leadership in considering the number of people with whom one converses, as well as the depth to which one converses, about a specific topic. De Veirman et al. (2017) designate an opinion leader as someone whom consumers consider to be a valuable source of information, echoing Childers (1986) in examining the likelihood that one is viewed as a trove of advice by his or her friends or neighbors.

Extensive knowledge and honesty act as two core characteristics of opinion leaders, allowing individuals to build trust among opinion followers and to transfer trustworthiness to the objects and entities they endorse (Turcotte et al., 2015). Opinion leaders typically hold active membership in online communities, frequently participate in interactions and, in the eyes of followers, demonstrate good taste when purchasing certain products (Casaló et al., 2018). Though one's popularity can positively accentuate opinion leadership in some cases, popularity does not automatically make one an opinion leader (De Veirman et al., 2017).

Followers view opinion leaders as models for how others should think or behave (Casaló et al., 2018). Followers are also more likely to crown the opinion leadership title to social media users who display originality and uniqueness, characteristics achieved through novel content, unusual behavior and an exhibited sense of differentiation (Casaló et al., 2018). Casaló et al. (2018) suggest that opinion leaders on social media can most effectively execute a commercialized partnership by authentically integrating endorsed products and brands into their personal narratives, fitting the endorsed objects to his or her lifestyle. The production of authentic content and disclosure of personal life details

help Instagram opinion leaders to establish relationships with followers (Lungeanu & Parisi, 2018).

An essence of fluidity accompanies one's opinion leadership status, as an individual can shift roles from opinion leader to opinion seeker in different contexts (Turcotte et al., 2015). For example, while a consumer may look to others on social media for information on political matters, he or she may be viewed as a source of in-depth knowledge in studio art communities. An opinion leader can be recognized as either monomorphic—only holding authority in certain industries or topics—or polymorphic—holding authority and knowledge on many different topics (Turcotte et al., 2015). For instance, in a content analysis of several Romanian fashion bloggers on Instagram, Lungeanu and Parisi (2018) found that the bloggers, also labeled as opinion leaders and influencers, displayed frequent content from many different facets of their lifestyles. After examining both image cues, such as people, places and objects, and text elements in Instagram posts, the authors grouped the content pieces into different categories (Lungeanu & Parisi, 2018). The fashion bloggers' content collections include consuming meals, spending time backstage at fashion events, exercising at the gym, promoting brands and collaborating with other fashion bloggers (Lungeanu & Parisi, 2018). The fashion bloggers position themselves as opinion leaders in multiple lifestyle areas, such as fashion and healthy eating (Lungeanu & Parisi, 2018). Overall, the fashion bloggers act as intermediaries between the fashion industry and followers, designating symbolic meaning to featured pieces by demonstrating how, where and with whom they should be worn (Lungeanu & Parisi, 2018).

Individuals perceived as opinion leaders can play an important role in attitude formation and in the decision-making process, serving as mediators between the mass media and everyday consumers. Followers demonstrate a strong tendency to follow fashion advice offered by another Instagram user, as well as recommend that others follow the user, when they perceive the user to be an opinion leader (Casaló et al., 2018). Further, intention to follow fashion advice on Instagram slightly strengthens when one perceives an appropriate fit between his or her values, interests and personality and those of the opinion leader (Casaló et al., 2018). Casaló et al. (2018) suggest that follower perceptions of opinion leaders and subsequent behaviors occur regardless of a follower's propensity to interact with other followers, meaning Instagram users who refrain from commenting, directly engaging with opinion leaders or co-creating value with brands are still strongly influenced by opinion leaders.

Perceived opinion leadership in peer-to-peer relations can also affect conative elements, such as purchase intention. High materialists were more willing to purchase a celebrity's branded products, such as a pair from Jessica Simpson's line of shoes, that were endorsed on a peer consumer's Facebook profile rather than on the target celebrity's Facebook profile (Jin & Ryu, 2018). When a friend who is perceived as an opinion leader shares a news story on Facebook, consumers are more likely to follow news from the target news outlet in the future (Turcotte et al., 2015). Gulamali and Persson (2017) studied the way in which a consumer's unmet needs contributed to the traits he or she noticed most in an Instagram influencer. Respondents in the study recalled a time that they switched brands after an Instagram influencer made a recommendation about a product (Gulamali & Persson, 2017). When consumers switch brands due to a need for

variety or dissatisfaction with current brand usage, they are most likely to view an Instagram influencer as an opinion leader, one who bears a high level of knowledge in a specific product category and expresses balanced, or both positive and negative, opinions about products (Gulamali & Persson, 2017).

Celebrities

In addition to the term *opinion leader*, authors sometimes interchange social media influencer with the term *celebrity*. One could argue that influencers operate in ways similar to traditional celebrities on television or in print when endorsing brands and featuring their own products and experiences. The popular, established tactic of using celebrity endorsement to tie associational meaning to a brand closely aligns with what influencers do through paid partnerships. Though influencers are sometimes called "Internet celebrities," an instinctive sense of difference remains between people whom consumers view as traditional celebrities, such as Bruno Mars or Mila Kunis, and people whom consumers view as social media influencers, such as PewDiePie or Huda Kattan.

Merriam-Webster defines celebrity as "a famous or celebrated person" ("Celebrity," 2019). Celebrities are viewed as individuals who gained fame through mainstream entertainment outlets rather than through social media, therefore separating celebrities from influencers who mainly established themselves using social media platforms (Centeno & Wang, 2017). Centeno and Wang (2017) believe that celebrities as human brands on social media remain tied to the traditional celebrity association with talents typically showcased in a public arena or movie theater (Centeno & Wang, 2017). In other words, celebrity human brands usually reflect individuals who are well-known for their musical, athletic or personable gifts. While one could argue that influencers,

regardless of celebrity status, are talented in ways that allow them to create unique content, influencers do not necessarily have to possess talents related to traditional performing arts.

Other instances demonstrate the sense of an invisible chasm between social media influencers and celebrities with social media profiles. Influencers perpetuate a self-made feel by pushing relevant posts and fostering connections with others, oftentimes by sharing personal details and avoiding framing their lives as "perfect" (Lungeanu & Parisi, 2018). The perceived closeness in social media platforms leads many influencers to refer to users who subscribe to their content as "followers" rather than as "fans" to avoid an uncomfortable and unfavorable air of being above others (Abidin, 2015). In a qualitative study by Abidin (2015), one influencer who rejects the "fan" label described himself as "normal" and "just like everyone." The ease portrayed by influencers who create and post content gives an entrepreneurial sense, leading to follower assumptions of self-sufficient users and self-generated posts. Influencers do not need (though they may have) a full crew to favorably present themselves or make enjoyable content.

Brown and Fiorella (2013) assert that the success of influencers stems from the concept that people, compared to celebrities, significantly inspire other people to take actions and make purchases. For instance, a photographer who began posting his work on Instagram gained so many followers that he was able to score endorsement deals with brands like Nike (Holmes, 2018). Despite his success, the photographer simply views himself as an adventurous friend who provides frequent life updates to followers (Holmes, 2018). Social media influencers tend to be interpreted as part of one's ingroup, whereas celebrities belong more to one's outgroup, despite consumer aspirations to

identify with celebrities (Jin & Ryu, 2018). In a qualitative study on agency decisions in influencer marketing, marketing managers expressed the advantage in using influencers to promote brands due to their established credibility (Childers et al., 2018). Users are following influencers by choice, so the recommendations influencers give about brands tend to be more meaningful than a digital advertisement (Childers et al., 2018). With established credibility and a repertoire of content, influencers are more likely to be perceived as experts on the products they showcase compared to celebrities endorsing products (Childers et al., 2018). The relationships influencers form with followers lends a sense of authenticity to the paid media included in some posts, making the content seem as though it is coming from a friend rather than a celebrity who is compensated to promote the brand (Childers et al., 2018).

One could argue that social media also allows celebrities—not just influencers—to reduce the power distance between themselves and their followers. Social media can lead consumers to perceive followed celebrities as friends, regardless of whether the celebrities engage in paid partnerships with brands (Jin & Phua, 2014; Boerman, Willemsen & Van Der Aa, 2017). Further, in the absence of ad disclosure, followers tend to recognize celebrity endorsements as paid partnerships significantly more when a brand posts the advertisement rather than when the endorsing celebrity posts the advertisement (Boerman et al., 2017). In other words, content featuring celebrities using certain products or services will most likely be interpreted as paid media when a brand posts the content, regardless of whether the featured celebrity was actually paid. If a celebrity posts the same content piece and lends no indication of a paid partnership, followers will most likely interpret the post as earned media. One reason that followers may interpret the

latter posts in such as way is due to the presumption that celebrities are sharing the product for non-commercialized or intrinsic reasons, such as actually liking and using the product (Boerman et al., 2017). The finding lends support for the argument that social media shortens the symbolic gap between influencers who have perceivably gained fame through social media and celebrities who have presumably gained fame elsewhere.

Several studies have contributed to a more refined classification by distinguishing between celebrities and micro-celebrities (Centeno & Wang, 2017; Ewers, 2017; Chae, 2018). Micro-celebrities compose a classification of social media users who have gained a large following primarily based on their social media content (Ewers, 2017; Chae, 2018; Puteri, 2018). Authors often treat the term *influencer* as a synonym of *micro-celebrity* (Ewers, 2017; Chae, 2018). From a consumer's perspective, micro-celebrities, or influencers, fall somewhere between mainstream celebrities and a consumer's acquaintances on a continuum (Chae, 2018). While celebrities as influencers manage social media profiles that attract followers based on the celebrity's fame gained outside of any social media platform, micro-celebrities as influencers typically build a high amount of clout from humble beginnings, attracting followers through their content's unique value offerings (Ewers, 2017). Though Centeno and Wang (2017) assert that celebrities engage in the co-creation of value with followers, the authors also suggest that the same co-creation of value may occur with micro-celebrities.

Ewers (2017) conducted an experiment to compare Instagram user perceptions of celebrities and micro-celebrities. Experimental manipulations were based on participant perceptions regarding the degree to which an Instagram user was a celebrity, famous, generally unknown and known for a specific object or activity, such as creating social

media content or singing (Ewers, 2017). Ewers (2017) found that participants reported higher purchase intention after seeing an endorsement in the celebrity condition, which featured singer Ariana Grande, rather than in the micro-celebrity condition, which featured German social media influencer Dagi Bee. The celebrity also scored higher on source credibility, which boosts purchase intention, compared to the micro-celebrity (Ewers, 2017). However, the study did not assess whether other elements, such as the extent to which one identifies with an influencer or feels that he or she knows an influencer in a personal way, affected participant reactions to the posts. Additionally, an influencer with an abundant network size, or follower quantity, can boost trust in some influencer-follower relationships, which may be partially responsible for increased source credibility perceptions for celebrities (Chapple & Cownie, 2017).

One could argue that an influencer's classification as either a celebrity or micro-celebrity based on consumer perceptions carries a temporal nature. Singer Shawn Mendes, comedian Bo Burnham, and model Kate Upton would most likely be categorized as celebrities today. Interestingly, each of them gained traction by posting self-made videos of their at-home performances on social media before being discovered by industry professionals (Lentz, 2019). Though a rise to fame through social media stands as a career-defining moment, the fact that the celebrities were former content creators who used social media as launch pads may not be salient in their brand images today. Therefore, consumers would most likely perceive the individuals to be celebrities first and social media influencers second.

On a deeper level of temporal-based meaning, celebrities on social media may follow a different life cycle of fame compared to social media influencers. The fleeting,

liquid nature of social media platforms may dampen an influencer's career in a downturn of platform popularity. While a celebrity can simply create a new profile on another platform, an influencer who has based the unique value of his or her content on the functionality of a particular platform may be faced with a challenge in career longevity. Relatedly, Eagar and Lindridge (2015) examined the threshold at which an individual can shift from a celebrity to an icon at different points in time. The authors view an individual as a celebrity when his or her actions formed one's self-image at a particular point in time so that the action will be nostalgically viewed as part of the individual's past (Eagar & Lindridge, 2015). The authors view an individual as an icon when his or her self-image has been seamlessly translated across periods of time, taking a more holistic feel of timelessness (Eagar & Lindridge, 2015). For instance, David Bowie formed his celebrity facet during the time in which he enacted a fictitious character named Ziggy Stardust, whose unique story paralleled Bowie's album called *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (Eagar & Lindridge, 2015). Homosexuality became strongly associated with Bowie's image through his performance as Ziggy, and the associations remained fixed through the decades, even after Bowie publicly identified as heterosexual (Eagar & Lindridge, 2015). Bowie formed his iconicity facet by successfully transforming his brand's meaning over time through performing in a new musical genré and being one of the first artists to offer downloads of his music through a website (Eagar & Lindridge, 2015).

Influencers may fit as celebrities and icons when viewed through Eagar and Lindridge's (2015) lens in that certain content pieces help to define them at a particular moment in time, yet their successful transitions to other social media platforms,

industries, brand endorsements, projects and other initiatives help to solidify their iconicity. Influencers viewed through the lens of liquid consumption benefit from the possibility of transitioning among the roles of entrepreneur, producer and consumer, a phenomenon known as *prosumption* (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Prosumption comprises production and consumption while maintaining that neither component holds greater importance over the other (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). One could argue that influencers engage in prosumption, consuming the functionality of social media platforms while producing content for others to consume. From an influencer marketing perspective, influencers also engage in further consumption by featuring or recommending products and services through content. Social media embodies the nature of prosumption, as the digital realm exudes an insecure yet entrepreneurial foundation for generating a following and making a living (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). In sum, liquid consumption complexities the categorization of celebrities and social media influencers. While the labels stand solidly defined at the ends of the follower-quantity continuum, celebrities and influencers become nearly indistinguishable at the continuum's fluid center. Thus, the current research proposes a brief framework, illustrated in Figure 2-1, to classify celebrities, opinion leaders and influencers.

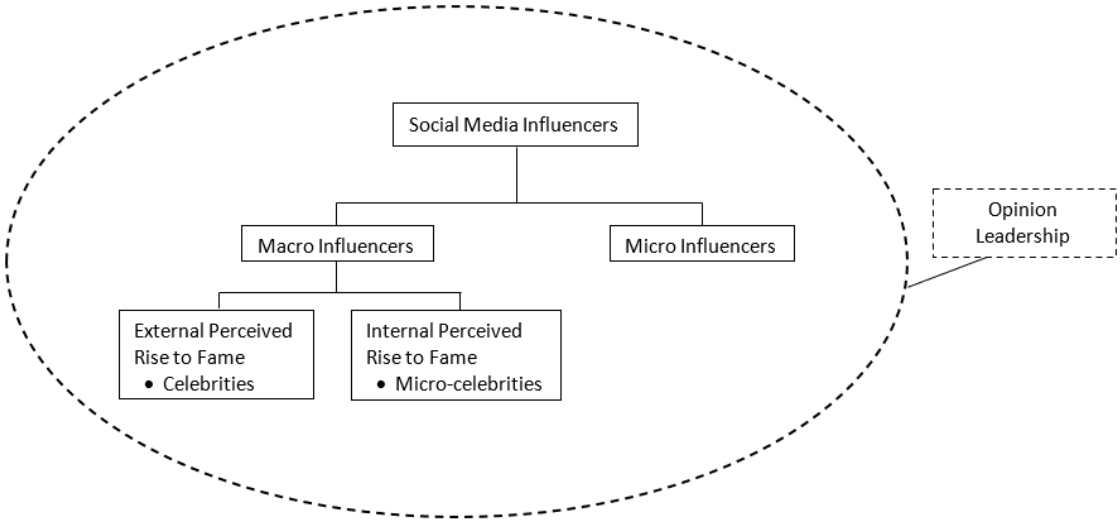

Figure 2-1 Influencer Classification Framework

Classifying Influencers

The current research agrees with Freberg et al.'s (2011) designation of influencers as independent endorsers who communicate through social media to affect consumer attitudes, adding that influencer actions can range from being the result of a paid arrangement with another entity to being the result of one's own volition without any expectation of monetary return. Additionally, the current research aligns with the Interactive Advertising Bureau's (2018) belief that influencers "have the potential to create engagement, drive conversation and/or sell products/services with the intended target audience." Importantly, the IAB (2018) acknowledges that influencers can be either celebrities, micro-celebrities or everyday peers, shifting the focus from follower quantity and reach to interaction quality and influential power. According to Figure 2-1, influencers communicating with followers through social media fit within a classification umbrella of social media influencers. The left branch of the framework includes influencers classified as macro. The macro classification comprises two subclassifications

based on one's perceived rise to fame. The first subclassification includes influencers whom consumers perceive to have gained fame through ways other than social media content, such as through television shows, talent searches or small venue performances. Individuals whom consumers recognize as celebrities would fit within the first subclassification. The second subclassification includes influencers whom consumers perceive to have gained fame by producing social media content, such as disseminating images or videos through a social media platform. The right branch of the framework includes influencers classified as micro.

Finally, opinion leaders act as valuable sources of information. Popularity can boost opinion leader credibility, but popularity remains an unnecessary determinant of opinion leadership. Therefore, the current research proposes that all Instagram users, regardless of their follower quantity, hold the potential to be perceived as opinion leaders through their actions. The realm of opinion leadership, represented by the dashed oval surrounding the outer edges of the framework, signifies the ability of any social media influencer to be perceived as an opinion leader by other consumers. An individual may be considered an opinion leader without being a social media influencer. For instance, a group of moms may look to a particular mom within the group as an opinion leader on healthy food and vitamins for children. The mom may lend advice to the other group members in person and through social media posts, yet the group members may not necessarily see the mom as a social media influencer. Examining individuals who could be considered opinion leaders within their peer groups or communities but who would also most likely not be considered social media influencers journeys beyond the scope of the current research.

Lifestyle Influencers

The current research studies social media influencers who specifically identify as lifestyle influencers. *Lifestyle* is defined as "people's activities in terms of (1) how they spend their time; (2) their interests, what they place importance on in their immediate surroundings; (3) their opinions in terms of their view of themselves and the world around them; and (4) some basic characteristics such as their stage in life cycle, income, education, and where they live" (Plummer, 1974, pg. 33). The term lifestyle can reflect an enhanced or desirable way of living ("Lifestyle," 2019). The activities, interests and opinions, or AIO, measure gauges one's lifestyle, including his or her views, priorities and ways of time allocation (Puteri, 2018).

Klear, a technology firm that specializes in influencer marketing, provides a way to find influencers from an array of niches to help clients reach pertinent consumers (2019). Klear offers the option for clients to find lifestyle influencers who cover subtopics like fitness, health, travel and inspiration (2019). A Klear report ranked the lifestyle industry as the top industry, compared to others like fashion and travel, for influencer partnerships in 2018 (Klear, 2019). A lifestyle brand within the industry is defined as "a variety of objects surrounding a particular cultural way of living a modern life" (Ramse, 2013, pg. 10). Russell and Stern (2006) consider the act of integrating products into scenarios as the "most defining element of the lifestyle community" (pg. 9). Martha Stewart credits herself with starting the lifestyle category, though many others, including celebrities, have embraced the industry in their own ventures (Ramse, 2013). Gwyneth Paltrow's lifestyle website, Goop.com, features content in an array of areas, from entertaining guests and creating stylish outfits to navigating parenthood and

practicing mindfulness. The website provides a trove of information, including recommendations on products, brands and activities, on how to live almost every facet of everyday life. Lifestyle influencers create similar content collections through social media.

Abidin (2015) notes that one key action of a lifestyle influencer is "documenting the trivial and mundane aspects of everyday life." Several Romanian fashion bloggers, some of which label themselves as lifestyle bloggers, differentiate themselves from commercialized brands by positioning themselves as "ordinary" (Lungeanu & Parisi, 2018). Lifestyle bloggers create content inspired by their own interests and everyday lives, sometimes gradually expanding from the focus on a single topic to a variety of facets in their personal lives (MediaKix, 2015; Chapple & Cownie, 2017). From observation, one can see that lifestyle influencers fill their social media profiles with content of themselves and their extended selves, distributing images of their designer jackets, albums of their travels, videos of their pets, and sentiments to their partners.

Chae (2018) classifies influencers as those who either mainly focus on and provide valuable information on specific interests, such as fashion, travel or food, or those who feature their daily lives and luxurious outings. Members of the latter group are typically known as lifestyle bloggers (Chae, 2018). Chae (2018) states that the difference between the two proposed influencer types correlates with a consumer's motivation to consume an influencer's content. For instance, followers with a high interest in influencers' daily lives, as opposed to followers with a high motivation to obtain information on specific topics, were more likely to make social comparisons with an influencer (Chae, 2018). Specifically, consumers making social comparisons with

influencers are more likely to suffer from personal insecurities, lower self-esteem, lower life satisfaction and greater public self-consciousness (Chae, 2018). Low satisfaction and low self-esteem also significantly predicted the extent to which a follower reported being envious of an influencer (Chae, 2018). Chae's (2018) conclusions imply that followers with a stronger interest in influencers' lives may follow influencers to meet unfulfilled social needs, such as belongingness or friendship, and ego needs, such as self-esteem and prestige. Given the classification schema Chae (2018) proposed, many influencers who, for instance, provide information on cooking and fitness routines while displaying daily experiences and personal life information could arguably fit into both categories. Therefore, two consumers with different needs could both meet them with the single goal of following the same influencer.

An example of one popular lifestyle influencer is Ingrid Nilsen. Admired by 1.4 million followers, Ingrid posts images of her world travels, daily outings, fashionable outfits and funny moments with her Pomeranian, Tayto. Ingrid features a mix of material products and experiences through both paid and earned media. For example, one post features Ingrid posing with skincare products in a paid partnership with Clinique. In another post, Ingrid finally reveals the brand of her Acne Studios leather jacket after followers repeatedly ask, providing earned media for Acne Studios.

Experiential posts include a London restaurant meal, a yoga session at home and a surprise magic show on a New York City subway ride. Also, some of Ingrid's content blends both material and experiential aspects, such as a post that shows Ingrid walking Tayto, drinking out of a KeepCup and wearing Birkenstocks. Though Ingrid did not tag any brands in the image or text, the mix of elements is acknowledged by one of her

followers with the comment, “Keep cups, dog, and birkenstocks. A++”, followed by a smile emoji and a blowing kiss emoji. Ingrid, along with many other lifestyle influencers on Instagram, use symbolic objects and everyday narratives to project an identity (Alexander, 2004; Toma, 2018). In turn, her continuous use of certain material possessions reinforces the meanings of the objects and helps to give followers an image of the objects’ prototypical user (Toma, 2018).

Influencers and Purchase Behavior

Social media offers a unique platform on which influencers can communicate. Using mobile devices that capture quality content and foster global interconnectedness, influencers can show various aspects of their lives and interact with followers at any time. Influencers and their perceived authority by followers can present a valuable advantage for brands looking to reach consumers through social media. Instead of talking at consumers with print and television ads, brands have the opportunity to be a part of a community by taking an influence path from brand to influencers to followers (Brown & Fiorella, 2013). Integrating brands into influencers’ everyday lives creates the opportunity to transfer the focus from products in magazine advertisements to products in realistic lifestyle settings (Childers et al., 2018).

The current research proposes that factors surrounding social media influencers may play a role in whether followers purchase and participate. Specifically, followers may find that they identify or perceive online relationships with influencers. Further, the current research proposes that followers may perceive and benefit from a sense of community with other followers of a particular influencer. Yuksel and Labrecque (2016) believe social media offer influencers the chance to serve followers in several main ways,

including sharing daily experiences, sharing personal information, providing commentary on current issues and communicating their personal values. In accordance with uses and gratifications theory, some followers may consume influencer content to affirm and reinforce social values, learn about societal issues or stay current on matters relevant to social group membership (Katz et al., 1973). Followers with a need for friendship or comfort visit YouTube to watch their preferred vloggers, viewing the vloggers as accessible and reliable (Chapple & Cownie, 2017).

Some consumers may be attracted to an influencer due to featured products, an influencer's ties to success or the information provided regarding products or lifestyle trends that represent a desired image. The brands influencers feature may be from an array of companies or product categories, but they may also fit into a harmonious group that matches the successful and appealing lifestyles that consumers want to achieve through acquisition. The current research proposes that influencers bear the potential to bestow the symbolic meaning of their identities on the products and experiences they feature, which may enhance the likelihood of a follower to pursue the products and experiences as ultimate consumption goals. First, the current research examines influencers who feature a constellation of products and experiences in their content and the perceived relationships consumers form with influencers and other followers. Second, the current research proposes that the presence of materialism as an individual difference strengthens the relationships between perceived connections among influencers and followers and a follower's material and experiential purchase intentions.

Materialism

Consumers striving to achieve consumption goals for need fulfillment take action under the guidance of personal values. A value is defined as “an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence” (Rokeach, 1973, pg. 5). In addition, a value guides actions and judgments pertinent to ultimate goals (Rokeach, 1973). Differences among consumers regarding personal values may present differences in their perceptions and behaviors on social media. The current research examines the effect of materialism as a personal value among the relationships proposed in the conceptual framework. Materialism stands as a construct of interest due to the rise of liquid consumption, which poses a challenge for consumers who acquire possessions as a primary way to achieve consumption goals. Previous literature on liquid consumption suggests that the ways in which materialists may react to increased liquidity remain unexplored. Materialism applies to trending managerial practices like influencer marketing, which often shows influencers featuring brands in scenes of experiences.

Materialism is defined as “a set of centrally held beliefs about the importance of possessions in one's life” (Richins & Dawson, 1992, pg. 308). Materialistic consumers, referred to as high materialists, focus on achieving goals through product acquisition. Materialism is not a binary variable but rather a continuum on which consumers fall depending on the priority placed on materialism as a personal value (Richins, 2017). In other words, each consumer is materialistic to a certain extent, with some being much more materialistic than others. Three overarching goals associated with materialism include achieving happiness, communicating success to others and enjoying products for

their own sake (Richins & Dawson, 1992). Acquisition as the pursuit of happiness composes the first dimension in which materialists see possessions as a fundamental factor in achieving satisfaction and well-being in life (Richins & Dawson, 1992). A consumer acquiring products to increase happiness may believe that she will be in a better mental or physical state after purchasing more of a particular item.

Materialists on the second dimension, known as possession-defined success, evaluate their own and others' success by the quantity and quality of possessions they have acquired (Richins & Dawson, 1992). For instance, a materialist may believe that actions associated with earning a high income, such as living in a large home or donning expensive jewels, signal that one has achieved success in life. Acquisition centrality lies on the third dimension in which materialists center their lives around possessions and the acquisition of possessions (Richins & Dawson, 1992). For instance, a consumer exhibiting strong acquisition centrality may fill his closet with designer wear, drive a luxury sports car and use the latest gadgets, all for the sake of simply owning and enjoying the products.

Materialism as a Value

Researchers remain divisive regarding the form of materialism, with some viewing the construct as inherent and others viewing the construct as nurtured. Belk (1985) viewed materialism as a trait, an innate element that varies in degree from one person to another. Materialism as a trait comprises the three dimensions of possessiveness, non-generosity and envy (Belk, 1985). Alternatively, Richins and Dawson (1992) approached materialism as a value, where one can choose to allow a particular value to guide the actions necessary to achieve an end state. For instance, if one

sets a goal to achieve happiness, he may choose materialism as a value to guide his behavior, which could include actions such as acquiring material products rather than spending time with others.

Viewing materialism as a value, rather than as a personality trait, is grounded in value theory (Schwartz, 1992). Value theory proposes that values represent goals related to human survival (Schwartz, 1992). The motivation or goal that a value represents distinguishes one value type from another (Bilsky & Schwartz, 1994). Some values are complementary and can be simultaneously held, while other values are conflicting and cause tension when simultaneously held (Schwartz, 1992). For example, egalitarian beliefs and concern for the welfare of others would theoretically conflict with a high materialist's pursuit of personal success and control over others (Schwartz, 1992).

Values differ from personality traits in several ways. Values are criteria used to evaluate the favorability of a behavior and can vary across individuals based on the importance each person places on particular goals (Bilsky & Schwartz, 1994). Personality traits describe behavior patterns that individuals exhibit to varying degrees (Bilsky &Schwartz, 1994). Values relate to goals existing within the realm of one's consciousness, whereas personality traits relate to behaviors exhibited by a person apart from one's intentions (Bilsky & Schwartz, 1994). Within the personal value perspective, materialism is recognized as learned rather than inherited (Richins, 2017). Socialization agents can positively influence one's materialism, as even children tend to take the values of important others with which they identify (Ahuvia & Wong, 2002). The current research examines materialism as value, using the three dimensions of acquisition as the

pursuit of happiness, possession-defined success and acquisition centrality (Richins & Dawson, 1992; Richins, 2004).

The Effects of Materialism

Consumers who identify as highly materialistic demonstrate similarities, such as the tendency to be individualistic and self-centered (Richins & Dawson, 1992; Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002). Some individuals begin to develop materialism in childhood, spurred by the presence of parental rejection or lack of parental warmth (Richins & Chaplin, 2015). The feelings of insecurity that evolve from such parental styles increase the likelihood that children will become materialistic adults (Richins & Chaplin, 2015). Peer interactions also affect materialism development. Children learn from the outcome favorability of their daily endeavors, such as a failure to master athletics or success in achieving a sense of style (Richins, 2017). A self-identity begins to form around the areas in which a child excels, and social comparisons with other peers, celebrities or fictional characters can also contribute to a child's self-identity formation (Richins, 2017). While some children opt for skills and knowledge to communicate self-identities, other children choose possessions (Richins, 2017). The latter choice more likely results in an essence of insecurity and an unstable sense of self (Richins, 2017). In adolescence, social rejection by peers can lead to an increase in materialism, yet peers who help to build one's self-esteem, fulfilling his or her need for approval, can reduce materialism (Richins, 2017). In general, high materialists lack interpersonal relationships, so they use products to fill the void (Rindfleisch et al., 2009). Contrary to one's intentions, the focus on product acquisition can give rise to a vicious cycle of isolation. For instance, loneliness tends to lead to an increase in the pursuit of material products with the goal of achieving a state of

happiness or a successful image (Pieters, 2013). As a result, the increase in materialism tends to lead to even greater loneliness (Pieters, 2013).

Times of higher uncertainty or insecurity seem to exacerbate the desire for possession acquisition (Rindfleisch et al. 2009; Richins & Chaplin, 2015). For instance, when faced with existential insecurity and death anxiety, high materialists cope by incorporating brands as part of their self-concepts (Rindfleisch et al., 2009). Some high materialists seem to be exhibiting more than just a liking for possessions; they are attempting to satisfy unmet needs for relationships and human connection. Rather than depending on friends or relatives in distressing times, high materialists rely on products to provide comfort. The symbolic interactionist model of materialism illustrates such tendencies, proposing that consumers associate with both objects and humans to communicate meaning (Claxton & Murray, 1994). However, when human relationships are lacking, some consumers rely more on symbolic objects to maintain self-identity (Claxton & Murray, 1994). Further, high materialists tend to spend more time shopping (Segev, Shoham & Gavish, 2015). Longer shopping duration may be partially due to the finding that high materialists experience positive emotions provoked by products they have not yet purchased (Richins, 2012). The belief that products bear transformative powers, or the ability to change a consumer's life in a meaningful way through usage, strengthens the relationship between high materialists and the positive pre-acquisition emotions they experience (Richins, 2012).

Previous literature largely shows materialism as a destructive value that can lead to decreased subjective well-being and life satisfaction in certain contexts (Larsen, Sirgy & Wright, 1999; Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Segev et al., 2015). However, a degree

of uncertainty remains regarding the negative effects of materialism. After conducting a meta-analysis, Dittmar, Bond, Hurst and Kasser (2014) found a negative correlation between materialism and well-being. The diminutiveness of the effect size suggests that further studies involving moderators, such as psychological and environmental factors, may provide valuable insight on which factors strengthen the relationship between materialism and well-being (Dittmar et al., 2014). Further, several longitudinal studies by Kasser et al. (2014) assessed the correlation of changes in materialistic aspirations to changes in subjective well-being over a certain period of a participant's lifetime. The findings from the first three studies revealed that each variable influenced change in the other, posing difficulty in establishing the causal nature of both materialistic aspirations and subjective well-being (Kasser et al., 2014).

Shrum et al. (2013) suggest that materialism can result in positive outcomes depending on a consumer's motivation for acquisition. Specifically, consumers employ materialism to construct their self-identities; sometimes efforts stem from the attempt to signal an identity to other people, and other times efforts stem from the attempt to signal an identity to oneself (Shrum et al., 2013). For instance, one may purchase a designer bag to display wealth to others or to refine one's perceived self-identity in his or her own mind. Acquiring to engage in other-signaling likely leads to a lower degree of well-being in the long run (Shrum et al., 2013). Goal achievement may be short-lived in the attempt to signal an identity to others, as one must constantly attend to consumption that will impress (Shrum et al., 2013). Contrarily, an increase in self-signaling acquisition tends to positively relate to well-being (Shrum et al., 2013). Acquisition for the self-exudes a more enduring nature, accurately aligned with one's intrinsic desires (Shrum et al., 2013).

The current research argues that materialistic goals can also be facilitated and achieved by liquid consumption, specifically through social media. Ozimek, Baer and Förster (2018) believe that social media apply to the concept of multifinality, where a consumer can achieve several goals by a single means. A correlation between materialistic goals and Facebook usage exists, such that consumers use social media as a means for materialistic need fulfillment due to the perceived ability to self-regulate oneself through the platform (Ozimek et al., 2018). Social media may also satisfy the needs of high materialists by way of self-identity maintenance, association with successful others, finding belongingness or status in a brand community and obtaining information on purchases related to projecting a desired self-concept.

One could argue that the facilitation of these goals by liquid consumption would be a positive for materialists, going against the argument of Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017) that liquidity is not celebratory. Also, because liquid consumption leads to the achievement of materialistic goals in ways different from traditional understanding, people who may not appear to be materialistic on social media, such as those who post content showing them spending time with others through experiences, may actually be highly materialistic. High materialists demonstrate a strong inclination to purchase products. It is important for managers to observe how these consumers may be coping in the midst of liquid consumption, which changes the value offerings of companies and the way consumers meet needs.

Parasocial Phenomena

The current research proposes that some followers may perceive a sense of friendship between themselves and an influencer. The concept is generally referred to as

parasocial phenomena, which can be defined as one's illusion that he or she has an intimate and personal relationship with a media personality (Tsai & Men, 2013). Horton and Wohl (1956) presented a conceptual groundwork for parasocial interaction, a specification of parasocial phenomena, in the context of media personalities on television. The authors considered parasocial interaction to occur when a personality directly communicated to the audience members in a way similar to how one would communicate in a private, personal conversation (Horton & Wohl, 1956). For example, a media personality may stimulate parasocial interaction by looking into the camera (i.e. "making eye contact") when addressing the audience or speaking as if the audience were part of the conversation. Parasocial interaction was regarded as one-sided, and any actual communication between the personality and the audience member exceeded the boundaries of parasociality (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Dibble, Hartmann and Rosaen (2015) interpret Horton and Wohl's (1956) concept of parasocial interaction as occurring only during the moment a viewer consumes content featuring the target media personality. Though Horton and Wohl (1956) acknowledged that parasocial interaction could occur with movie stars or fictional characters, the authors focused on personalities functioning only within the realm of media, such as announcers and interviewers. Since the birth of Horton and Wohl's (1956) work, researchers have studied the phenomenon in various contexts, such as television news anchors, brands and actresses, and by a variety of terms and definitions. The scope of previous literature on parasocial phenomena presents a strong foundation for studying the construct in the context of influencers and followers on social media platforms.

After Horton and Wohl's (1956) inception of parasocial phenomena, new technologies increasingly challenged the bounds of the concept throughout the rest of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. In the context of local television news, a motive to obtain information, along with a perception that "real" information was presented and an affinity for watching the news, positively influenced perceived parasocial phenomena (Rubin, Perse & Powell, 1985). Other motives, such as enjoying exciting entertainment, did not lead to increased parasocial phenomena (Rubin et al., 1985).

Giles (2002) proposed four qualities by which one could classify a particular interaction as parasocial. The first quality involves high parasocial interaction when a personality is communicating with a group of people compared to one individual (Giles, 2002). The second quality involves the distance between the personality, while the third quality involves the degree of formality within the interaction (Giles, 2002). The last quality involves the potential relationship between the two entities in the interaction (Giles, 2002). Table 2-2 outlines the characteristics of each of the four qualities proposed by Giles (2002).

Table 2-2

Continuum of Social-Parasocial Interaction

Encounter	**Location**	**Constraints**		**Potential Relationship**	
		Formal	**Informal**	**Formal**	**Informal**
SOCIAL					
Dyadic	Proximate / Distant	Interview / Email Message	Conversation / Email Message	Work Colleague / Future Associate	Close Friend / Cyber Friend
Small Group	Proximate	Working Group	Friendship	Colleague	Friend
Large Group	Proximate / Distant	Board Meeting / Lecture (lecturer)	Party / Lecture (fellow student)	Future Colleague / Semi-parasocial	Future Friend / Future Friend/ Colleague
Encounter with Media Figure	Proximate / Distant	Fan Club Convention / Phone-In Show	Chance Meeting / Personal Letter	Dyadic (but role bound) / Dyadic (but role bound)	/ Semi-Parasocial
First-Order PSI	Distant	News Broadcast	—	Parasocial (but chance of contact)	—
Second-Order PSI	Distant	Soap Character	—	Parasocial (contact only at representative level)	—
Third-Order PSI	Distant	Cartoon Figure	—	Purely Parasocial (no chance of contact)	—
PARASOCIAL					

Though Giles' (2002) classification schema provides boundaries for pinpointing parasocial phenomena in certain contexts, the emergence of social media influencers further scrambles the attempt to reduce the complexity of the concept. For instance, an influencer would mostly likely fit the description as a first-order parasocial interaction entity (similar to a news broadcaster). However, an influencer would not necessarily fit

all of the same qualities as a news broadcaster. Influencers communicate with a group of followers rather than a single follower, therefore implying high parasocial interaction. Yet the perceived distance between an influencer and followers can differ, especially with the rise of local influencers, who can be followed by hometown residents aware of the influencer's locality. Depending on a follower's individual characteristics and motivation for following an influencer, his or her interaction with the influencer may range from highly parasocial, such as no commenting or direct messaging, to low parasociality, such as informally sending a direct message, commenting or meeting the influencer at an event. Finally, a follower could perceive an influencer to be an online friend, indicating low parasocial interaction, a future friend or colleague, indicating mid-level parasocial interaction, or an individual that he or she can only contact in the maintenance of the influencer's facade, indicating high parasocial interaction.

Parasocial Phenomena on Social Media

The dawn of influencer marketing through social media seems to have awakened another perspective of parasocial interaction, one in which the boundaries remain loosely rooted. Social media is more likely to generate a higher level of parasocial interaction compared to traditional media (Tsai & Men, 2013). Social media provides users the opportunity to experience the interaction between brands and followers and to get to know a personality through the content he or she posts (Tsai & Men, 2013). For instance, users who perceive a high degree of interactivity and openness on social media profiles of object brands are more likely to experience a higher degree of parasocial interaction with the brand (Labrecque, 2014). In another instance, readers tend to experience greater parasocial interaction when consuming information through blogs compared to

magazines (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011). Readers feel that bloggers emanate a more unbiased nature compared to writers who publish in magazines (Colliander & Dahlen, 2011).

Researchers have also found parasocial interaction with YouTube personalities. When video bloggers, or "vloggers," disclose personal facts about their lives, regardless of whether the information is positive, negative or neutral, followers perceive them to be more real and true to themselves (Ferchaud, Grzeslo, Orme & LaGroue, 2018). The intimacy a personality fosters through his or her performance tends to be well-received and influential for consumers who are watching (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Authentically portraying oneself through YouTube content that aligns with his or her real life, according to follower perceptions, infuses parasocial attributes into a vlogger's work and can eventually lead to a parasocial relationship (Chapple & Cownie, 2017; Ferchaud et al., 2018). Media personalities, in general, work to perpetuate the illusion of two-way communication and sincerity, with audience members attributing their support and admiration to such sincerity (Horton & Wohl, 1956). One could argue that influencers employ the same illusion of reciprocity, partially due to the unrealistic nature of developing personal relationships after an influencer reaches a following based in the thousands or millions. An influencer's content may appear to be genuine, as some influencers share information regarding personal issues traditionally deemed weak or embarrassing. Yet influencers still premeditatively create their content, allowing them to reveal only what they want to reveal to their followers.

Parasocial interaction can also heighten the perceptions of luxury fashion brands featured by YouTube vloggers (Lee & Watkins, 2016). Watching a vlogger who features

a luxury brand significantly increases the brand value and the degree to which a viewer perceives him or herself as matching with other users of the luxury brand (Lee & Watkins, 2016). Parasocial interaction between a vlogger and viewer strengthens outcomes, which include a viewer's intention to purchase the luxury brand (Lee & Watkins, 2016). The effects of parasocial interaction on brand perceptions and purchase intention clears a path for exploration with other types of purchases, such as experiences and non-luxury, everyday products, featured by social media personalities.

Defining Parasocial Phenomena

In addition to the term *parasocial interaction*, literature on parasocial phenomena uses the terms *parasocial attachment* and *parasocial relationship* to describe similar phenomena. For instance, Russell and Stern (2006) employed parasocial attachment in the context of a television show. Parasocial attachment is defined as "a viewer's feelings of closeness (distance) to a character" (Russell & Stern, 2006, pg. 10). Parasocial attachment involves getting to know a target individual, which can lead one to see the target individual as a "referent other" (Russell & Stern, 2006). Once the target individual becomes a referent other, the individual's likelihood of influencing the other party involved in the parasocial attachment increases (Russell & Stern, 2006). A parasocial relationship refers to a bond that may eventually arise from repeated parasocial interactions (Klimmt, Hartmann & Schramm, 2006; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008; Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). Motivation to use social media for the purposes of forming connections and consuming entertainment can positively influence parasocial relationships, meaning social media users with a strong need for relatedness may be more

apt to see influencers they follow as friends with which they have relationships (Yuan, Kim & Kim, 2016).

Dibble et al. (2015) call for a reassessment in the definition and measurement of parasocial interaction and parasocial relationship. In a study comparing the constructs, participants assessed the degree of parasocial interactions they experienced across experimental conditions after watching a video in which a woman spoke to the audience either facing the camera or facing away from the camera so that her profile was visible to the audience (Dibble et al., 2015). Upon examining the performance of two scales, a parasocial interaction scale (Rubin et al., 1985) and an experience of parasocial interaction scale (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011), Rubin et al.'s (1985) scale correlated more strongly with a parasocial relationship scale by Tukachinsky (2010) than it did with Hartmann and Goldhoorn's (2011) scale (Dibble et al., 2015). Dibble et al.'s (2015) findings allude to a move in the direction of using parasocial relationships to explore parasocial phenomena in a broader sense. Specifically, one can limit parasocial interactions as feelings of mutuality that solely occur during content consumption or viewing, whereas one can consider parasocial relationships as associations that endure beyond the moment of content consumption (Dibble et al., 2015). Russell and Stern (2006) adapted nine items from the Rubin et al. (1985) scale to measure parasocial attachment in the context of sitcom product placement, suggesting an intended focus on the role of parasocial relationships, as opposed to parasocial interactions, in consumers' lives and the ways in which parasocial relationships affect consumer attitudes and purchase intentions. Going forward, the current research will use the term *parasocial*

relationship to signify the developed and enduring closeness between a follower and an influencer.

In conclusion, consumers have demonstrated the tendency to form parasocial relationships with personalities across media types. Belk (2013) spoke to the dynamics of online relationships when he asked, are we really closer to others because of online brand communities or online friends? Perhaps as online users, we are growing closer to feeling "alone together" (Turkle, 2011; Belk, 2013). In a qualitative study with a group of college students, participants noted that their Instagram followers reflected mostly close offline relationships, while both strong and weak offline relationships were reflected among their Facebook friends (Hayes, Carr & Wohn, 2016a). Given that the study took place at least three years ago, shifting usage trends may affect the degree to which college students currently view Instagram follower relationships. In other words, the trend of having weak ties or no offline relationships with many followers may now be prevalent on Instagram. Due to the increased trend of virtually maintaining ties with others, consumers attached to social media platforms like Instagram may be more likely to engage in parasocial relationships with influencers rather than with television or radio personalities.

Parasocial Relationships and Materialism

The current research proposes that high materialists may also develop parasocial relationships with influencers. High materialists traditionally value possessions more than they value relationships with others (Richins & Dawson, 1992). Considering that high materialists lack interpersonal relationships and often turn to products in an attempt to fulfill the need for relatedness, the ease of liquid friendship practices on social media may

lead high materialists to latch onto influencers to fulfill social needs. Liquid consumption implies the replacement of close partnerships with semi-detached and virtual relationships (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Social media allows consumers to participate in perceived social relationships in a "liquid" way while maintaining perceived control within the relationship (Bardhi et al., 2012). Social media offers consumers the ability to achieve substitute companionship by replacing tangible offline relationships with online ones (Lundberg & Hulten, 1968; Katz et al., 1973).

Further, consumers can be "nomadic" about the relationship and move on at any time without any close negative consequences (Bardhi et al., 2012). In other words, one could argue that little commitment exists in maintaining friendships on social media. Social media users do not necessarily have to give of themselves to maintain relationships, benefitting from automatic birthday reminders and single clicks to send congratulations or thanks to a friend. Users can end disputes with a "block" rather than an in-person truce. In the context of following an influencer, platforms like Instagram demand no reciprocation from followers, meaning that followers can enjoy one-sided interactions and still form parasocial relationships (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). Due to the small amount of commitment, there is little risk of fear and rejection for high materialists (Pieters, 2013).

Materialism correlates with loneliness (Pieters, 2013). Lonely social media users are more likely to show discrepancies between the online and offline worlds in terms of whom they consider to be a "friend" (Jin, 2013). Increased loneliness may be a contributing characteristic that prompts high materialists to perceive a sense of closeness to an influencer. Relatedly, Horton and Wohl (1956) proposed that socially isolated

consumers exhibit a stronger tendency to engage in parasocial practices with media personalities. On the contrary, Rubin et al. (1985) found that a high need for social interaction did not correlate with a tendency to perceive parasocial happenings with television news anchors. However, one's tendency to watch television when feeling lonely correlated significantly with perceptions of parasocial phenomena (Rubin et al., 1985). The same concept may apply in the social media environment, where high materialists may be more likely to opt for social media as a temporary fix for loneliness.

Parasocial relationships formed with influencers through social media may also serve as part of a coping mechanism for high materialists in an attempt to maintain control and certainty in one's environment. The phenomenon relates to Perse and Rubin's (1989) findings in which the time a viewer has been acquainted with a character through continued viewing of a specific soap opera positively relates to how well the viewer feels confident in knowing the character's personality (Perse & Rubin, 1989). In turn, increased confidence leads to greater parasocial phenomena (Perse & Rubin, 1989). Reducing uncertainty through greater confidence in knowing an influencer's perceived personality, thus being able to better predict their emotions and behaviors, may appeal to high materialists, who have been found to connect with brands to cope with uncertainty and anxiety in some situations (Rindfleisch et al., 2009). Additionally, Ozimek & Förster (2017) suggest that friends, or followers, on social media can also be viewed as digital possessions, especially in the eyes of high materialists.

Human Brands

The current research proposes that one can view social media influencers as human brands with which followers can identify and integrate the influencer's human

brand into their self-concepts. Marketers tap into brands of particular people, oftentimes the brands of celebrities, to accomplish objectives, such as boosting sales or initiating meaning transfer between the celebrity's brand and the marketer's brand. When used within the realm of marketing, a person's brand is termed a *human brand.* A human brand is defined as "any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications" (Thomson, 2006). Previous literature has examined human brands in the context of celebrities, professional athletes, artists and academics (Close, Moulard & Monroe, 2011; Carlson & Donavan, 2013; Moulard, Rice, Garrity & Mangus, 2014; Moulard, Garrity & Rice, 2015). The current research views social media influencers as human brands who have built a brand around the voice, tone, subject matter and overall mission behind their content. For instance, fashion and lifestyle bloggers aim to maintain authenticity by adding their personal style, from nonverbal posture and gestures to spoken commentary and product opinions, to the content they create (Lungeanu & Parisi, 2018).

Centeno and Wang (2017) argue that relevant stakeholders, such as consumers, advertisers and media entities, help to form the identities of celebrity human brands through co-creation of value on social media. Celebrities also contribute to the co-creation of value through their interactions with followers within celebrities' online brand communities (Centeno & Wang, 2017). Human brand characteristics can also affect consumer perceptions. Moulard et al. (2015) found that the traits of rarity and stability act as antecedents for the perceived authenticity of a celebrity. A celebrity viewed as uncommon, which includes the traits of possessing distinguished skill in a certain area

and exhibiting originality, and as unwavering, which includes a consistency in personality over time, are likely to be viewed as authentic (Moulard et al., 2015).

Similar to the way in which consumers relate to brands for physical objects, consumers can relate to and connect with brands for humans. Marketers have been initiating points of relatedness for some time to boost the sale of products. Brand managers created the fictitious Betty Crocker character from the idea that American consumers would be more apt to purchase a product if they were able to relate to the individual on the package (Ramse, 2013). The concept enjoyed early success. In the mid-1940s, Eleanor Roosevelt claimed the top spot as the most recognized woman—Betty Crocker placed right behind Roosevelt as the second most recognizable (Ramse, 2013). Followers may have the opportunity to form connections with influencers as human brands, similar to the way consumers form connections with object brands.

Human Brands and Consumer Needs

Thomson's (2006) conceptual framework on consumer motivations for engaging with human brands proposes that consumers fulfill their needs in different ways depending on situational context. Specifically, consumers aiming to satisfy autonomy and relatedness needs may lead some to experience attachment feelings for a human brand (Thomson, 2006). For instance, some respondents expressed the fulfilled need for autonomy by speaking of their efforts to emulate the self-endorsed behavior of musicians (Thomson, 2006). Specifically, various musicians who display tremendous talent on stage remain friendly and relatable in interactions with concert goers and hardworking in everyday life to support their spouses and children (Thomson, 2006).

Another respondent expressed the fulfilled need for relatedness when she spoke of a Blue Rodeo concert experience that led her to identify as a Rodeohead, a moniker for passionate followers of the band (Thomson, 2006). Relatedness carries a community element that includes the connections one forms with others due to the common ground of a particular human brand. Further, respondents described the presence of love and emotional connection with human brands, using similar terms that one might use to describe a romance (Thomson, 2006). One could argue that the respondents' affective connections speak to the perceived bonds of friendship or closeness that occur in parasocial phenomena. While Thomson (2006) found that consumers do not bond with human brands to fulfill a need for competence, consumers may repel from human brands who reduce their competence. Loroz and Braig (2015) challenged the missing connection between competence and attachment by studying the factors that strengthened attachment between avid viewers and Oprah as a human brand. The authors found that for instances in which competence embodies a central offering of a human brand, such as Oprah and her guidance to viewers on improving one's lifestyle, competence does positively influence attachment (Loroz & Braig, 2015). Respondents spoke of how Oprah helped them to improve their thoughts, actions and self-images, dishing advice to meet their need for competence (Loroz & Braig, 2015). Brand personality factors such as the degree to which a consumer considers a human brand to be favorable, unique and representative of a clear, authentic mission increased attachment as moderators (Loroz & Braig, 2015).

Thomson (2006) suggested that human brands who used online profiles to communicate in an alternative way would likely attract fans, anxious to learn more about the human brand. Interestingly, Thomson (2006) also suggested that online platforms

would help to break down a sense of hierarchy, encouraging autonomy and relatedness with stronger lateralization. The social structure of and consumer interactions with social media influencers today closely mirror Thomson's (2006) predictions. For instance, social media influencers remain ever-accessible to followers through their mobile devices, allowing them to post content at every opportune moment. Social media provide an environment for regular interaction between users, a condition ideal for growth in follower attachment to influencers as human brands (Thomson, 2006).

One could also view social media influencers as means to fulfill consumers' needs. For instance, some followers strongly identify with influencers due to perceived similarities between their self-schema and the influencer's schema, a concept known as human-brand identification (Carlson & Donavan, 2017). Human-brand identification is defined as "a cognitive state in which the individual comes to view him- or herself as a member of a social entity" (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Carlson & Donavan, 2013, pg. 194). Human-brand identification in the cognitive dimension occurs when a follower perceives that his or her self-schema, or the beliefs held about oneself, overlaps with an influencer schema (Carlson & Donavan, 2013).

Self-brand connection stands as a closely related construct to human-brand identification. Self-brand connection is defined as "the extent to which individuals have incorporated a brand into their self-concept" (Escalas & Bettman, 2003, pg. 340). Personal-brand connection, defined as "the relationship between a consumer and a brand on the basis of a connection between a consumer's unique self and what the brand symbolizes for the consumer," implies a related meaning to self-brand connection and is consequently regarded as synonymous with self-brand connection in the current research

(Swaminathan et al., 2007, p. 249). Brands in the context of self-brand connections were originally presented as inanimate brands used by reference groups (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Consumers extract characteristics from particular reference groups to form prototypes of different brand users (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). The characteristics of a prototypical brand user can be imposed upon any consumer using a brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Consumers use these meanings and associations to form self-identities (McCracken, 1986; Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Escalas and Bettman (2003) ground self-brand connection on Gestalt principles, where consumers form a set of associations about a brand to represent symbolic meaning, also recognized as a brand's identity (Schmitt, 2012). Consumers integrate different information pieces to construct a brand concept or image, such as "innovative" or "lifestyle" (Schmitt, 2012). Brand concepts lead to goal-oriented consumption, such as connecting with a brand of sophistication to achieve an image of success (Schmitt, 2012). Brand concepts can also give way to assigning human traits to brands and forming relationships with brands, similar to relationships one would form with a human (Schmitt, 2012). Self-relevance drives a consumer's motivation to engage in brand relationships, meaning that the initial set of associations surrounding the brand (i.e. the brand's identity) is relevant to the consumer in some way (Schmitt, 2012). A consumer's engagement in brand relationships can stem from the purpose of building or maintaining a self-identity, a concept known as self-brand identity (Schmitt, 2012). Self-brand identity can be expressed through both linking oneself to a brand (i.e. self-brand connection) and integrating a brand into one's self-schema (i.e. human-brand identification) (Schmitt, 2012). The current research combines the self-brand connection

and human-brand identification constructs to adequately represent consumer relationships with influencers as human brands, a concept hereby referred to as self-human brand connection. *Self-human brand connection* is defined as the degree to which one integrates the symbolic meaning of a human brand identity into his or her self-concept.

Thomson (2006) focuses on attachment to a human brand rather than on connection to a human brand. However, Schmitt (2012) suggests that self-brand connection is expressed in the form of brand attachment. A similar relationship between brand attachment and self-brand connection could transfer to the context of human brands. Using Instagram to facilitate consumption goal achievement offers opportunities to connect with influencers and strengthens the likelihood of using the connections to satisfy needs. For instance, consumers with a high need for social inclusion and belongingness demonstrate stronger self-brand connections with brands endorsed by celebrities in an effort to associate the symbolic meaning of the brands with their social identities (Escalas & Bettman, 2017).

Homophily Theory

Self-human brand connection entails an essence of homophily theory (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970). Homophily is defined as "the degree to which pairs of individuals who interact are similar with respect to certain attributes, such as beliefs, values, education, social status, etc." (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970). Homophily theory posits that sources exhibit a stronger tendency to attract receivers of their information when the source and receiver share perceived similarity, making such an interaction homophilous (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970). Further, when sources and receivers share commonalities, communication tends to be more effective, whereas when sources and receivers

experience unrelatable differences, communication can become distorted and perceived as inconsistent with a receiver's beliefs (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970).

Followers typically experience a sense of homophily with influencers on at least one dimension of interest, easing the acceptance of information from source to receiver. Followers who share the same values, interests or experiences with an influencer know where the influencer is "coming from," arguably a marking factor of influencer success in native advertising. Rogers and Bhowmik (1970) note that entities, such as marketers, must find the right blend of an influencer's heightened knowledge of the target subject matter and an influencer's similarity with followers. Followers may flock to influencers to receive informational value, yet influencers who present themselves as knowledgeable in a way that places them on a different level from followers may actually create greater heterophily. Heterophily is defined as "the degree to which pairs of individuals who interact are different with respect to certain attributes" (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970). As an illustration, consider two contrasting situations: a first instance in which a product's inventor communicates product information and a second instance in which an influencer recommends the same product to followers after a trial purchase. One could argue that the first instance would result in a greater perceived power distance between the product inventor and the followers, lessening homophily in terms of the consumer role. Considering similarity as the source of cohesion, the current research acknowledges that homophily between an influencer and his or her followers stands as a powerful precursor for self-human brand connection.

Human Brands and Materialism

Social identity theory plays a role in human-brand identification and connection. Consumers who perceive themselves to align with particular identities continually aim to enhance or reinforce their images in accordance with the identities (Carlson & Donavan, 2017). One way consumers maintain their identities lies in associating with human brands who exhibit appealing traits (Carlson & Donavan, 2017). For instance, some consumers identify with American football athletes based on antecedents such as reputation, which embodies traits such as prestige and trustworthiness (Carlson & Donavan, 2013, 2017). Further, consumers striving to achieve self-enhancement goals likely form self-brand connections with brands used by others in a group to which the consumer aspires to belong (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). For instance, high materialists aiming for an image of success may be more likely to identify with macro influencers whose high follower quantities symbolize the influencer's popularity and success. Associating with macro influencers may enable materialistic followers to reinforce their identities and feel as though they belong to an in-group.

Consumers who form personal-brand connections can be driven to make such connections to satisfy the need for affiliation, which can be achieved through either a dyadic or group relationship (Lopez et al., 2017). High materialists have been shown to form self-brand connections during times of uncertainty and mortality salience, showing that high materialists reach for brands to fulfill the need for safety and security (Rindfleisch et al., 2009). A high materialist's mere existence in an insecure world of high liquidity may be adequate to drive one's motivation to make self-human brand connections (Bardhi & Eckardt, 2017). Consumers who view a human brand as both the

bearer of positive traits and as a means to fulfill certain needs are much more likely to experience separation distress, as well as express proximity maintenance and view the human brand as both a form of psychological protection and a way to maintain security (even during stress-free moments) (Loroz & Braig, 2015). Also, high materialists who strive to maintain a successful image or a state of happiness also demonstrate a stronger tendency to acquire possessions in an attempt to cure loneliness (Pieters, 2013).

Parasocial Phenomena and Self-Human Brand Connection

Parasocial phenomena differs from identification and connection. In a parasocial relationship, the influencer resonates with a follower due to a sense of friendship. A follower may likely recognize the unique elements of an influencer's brand, such as his or her physical appearance, cadence, use of language, and behavior, and feel as though they know the influencer as a friend (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In human-brand identification, the influencer resonates with a follower due to a sense that the influencer is similar to the follower. A direct address from a media personality can positively affect parasocial phenomena while having no significant effect on identification (Cohen, Oliver & Bilandzic, 2019).

Identification relative to parasocial phenomena has been classified as either similarity identification or wishful identification (Giles, 2002). Similarity identification involves a follower sharing at least one characteristic with the influencer (Feilitzen & Linne, 1975; Giles, 2002). Developing self-brand connections with human brands consistent with one's current self-concept (i.e. a way to achieve self-verification goals) aligns with similarity identification (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Importantly, a follower may experience parasocial interaction in the absence of similarity identification (Feilitzen

& Linne, 1975; Giles, 2002). Wishful identification, on the other hand, involves having a desire to emulate the influencer by way of self-identity, behavior or other elements (Giles, 2002). Developing self-brand connections with human brands related to a desired self-concept (i.e. a way to achieve self-enhancement goals) aligns with wishful identification (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). While a consumer can form self-connections to achieve both self-verification and self-enhancement goals, he or she can place emphasis on one goal over the other (Escalas & Bettman, 2003).

The literature finds that the relationship between parasocial phenomena and identification differs across contexts. Some findings indicate that a parasocial relationship, if destined to occur, would develop after establishing common ground with a media personality through identification. Wohlfeil and Whelan (2012) published an account of a parasocial relationship that developed between one of the authors and actress Jena Malone. Identifying with Jena's childhood, one in which her family lived in an underprivileged neighborhood and struggled financially, grew the imagined bond between the author and the actress through relatable points (Wohlfeil & Wehlan, 2012). The author first outwardly expressed his fascination with Jena by purchasing copies of nearly every movie in her filmography and placing posters and pictures of Jena in his home (Wohlfeil & Wehlan, 2012). The author then began to construct a narrative of imagined events with Jena, from spending time with her to asking her hand in marriage (Wohlfeil & Wehlan, 2012). The process of focusing on Jena's characteristics salient to the author through similarity nurtured both a perception of Jena's genuineness and an emotional closeness that eventually elicited a parasocial relationship (Wohlfeil & Wehlan, 2012).

Other findings indicate that a parasocial relationship, if destined to occur, would develop prior to identification. Parasocial phenomena, in some instances, can give rise to identification (Russell & Stern, 2006; Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). In other words, once someone becomes closer in relationship to a target individual, he or she might begin to see oneself as similar to the target individual, such as the relationship between a viewer and a character on a television show (Russell & Stern, 2006). Research also suggests that parasocial relationships bear the ability to make media personalities an object of a viewer's identification group (Horton & Wohl, 1956). A follower engaged in a parasocial relationship with an influencer may be more likely to recognize the influencer as a part of one's social identity, similar to the way a follower may recognize an object brand as part of his or her social identity. Social identity theory lends insight to the practice of making adjustments to oneself in effort to increase one's degree of fit with a social identity group (Hogg, Terry & White, 1995). Specifically, a social identity describes one's current characteristics and simultaneously dictates one's future identity-aligning behavior, including the obtainment of certain products and the enjoyment of certain experiences (Hogg et al., 1995). Escalas and Bettman (2017) found that a parasocial relationship with a celebrity endorser mediates the relationship between a consumer's high needs for belongingness and affiliation and self-brand connections with the endorsed brands. The authors believe that consumers who have a high need to belong form parasocial relationships of false intimacy with celebrities to achieve identity goals based on relationships (Escalas & Bettman, 2017). Thus, the current research proposes:

H1: The strength of a parasocial relationship between a follower and an influencer will positively affect the strength of a follower's self-human brand connection with the influencer.

Brand Communities

Brands can symbolize meaning not only for individual consumers but also for groups (Schmitt, 2012). Social media influencers as human brands may develop a following of supporters who could collectively be viewed as a human brand community. Further, the meaning communicated by the influencer as a human brand would transfer to the brand community (Schmitt, 2012). A brand community is defined as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand," (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, pg. 412). Brand communities each involve a degree of connectedness among members, shared experiences among members and a sense of moral responsibility to remain loyal to the brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Some celebrities have developed not only their own communities but also their own cultures surrounding themselves as human brands. Lady Gaga's "Little Monsters" and Jimmy Buffett's "Parrotheads" have formed unique tribes based on the lifestyle of a single individual. The sense of community among members can initiate bonds of belongingness and shared similarity, even though a given member may have no strong friendship with or knowledge of the others.

Some online community involvement specifically surrounds brand communities. While offline brand community involvement may include the physical act of helping or forming bonds with another person largely based on the brand one is using, online brand community involvement reflects the same principles in a virtual context (Muniz &

O'Guinn, 2001). For instance, users of an electronic brand may answer questions, solve problems and share experiences with one another over forums. In another instance, consumers' partial to an outdoor clothing brand may find others like them through the brand's social media pages. Thus, the current research aims to answer the following:

RQ2: How do relationships and communities on social media influence the purchase intentions of high materialists?

Social and Psychological Brand Communities

Brand communities typically include the characteristics of consciousness of kind, shared traditions and rituals, and moral responsibility (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Much of the fulfillment of these characteristics would include interaction among brand community members. While brand communities have been studied under the assumption that member interactions fit the same criteria for any brand or context, Carlson, Suter and Brown (2008) contrarily proposed that brand communities may either be more socially oriented or more psychologically oriented. Interaction behavior among members plays a vital role regarding the brand community's classification as either psychological or social (Carlson et al., 2008). Members of a social brand community interact with other brand users and participate in structured social matters (Carlson et al., 2008). Alternatively, members of a psychological brand community refrain from interaction with one another yet still perceive a sense of community with other brand users (Carlson et al., 2008). Present in both social and psychological brand communities is a psychological sense of brand community, which is defined as "the degree to which an individual perceives relational bonds with other brand users," (Carlson et al., 2008, pg. 286).

A psychological sense of brand community can exist within online brand communities. Phua et al. (2017) found that users following brands on Instagram showed high brand community-related outcomes of brand engagement (active participation) and brand commitment (a sense of belonging), making evident the potential for both social and psychological brand users to view Instagram as a useful platform for goal achievement. When examining motivations to use Instagram among followers of the clothing retailer brand Zara, researchers found that user motivations include a feeling of belonging to a community of brand admirers, as well as brand identification and brand attachment (Nedra et al., 2019). Further, participants noted that Instagram provides a medium to identify with other followers who share a similar passion (Nedra et al., 2019). In a study by Tsai and Men (2013) on consumer motivations for following Facebook brand pages, most users did not consider the benefit of a sense of community as a motive for visiting or following a brand page. However, the study neither examined the effects of personal values, such as materialism, nor controlled for the types of brands respondents followed (Tsai & Men, 2013).

Researchers have found evidence of online brand communities surrounding human brands as well, including social media influencers. In studying Twitter activity and followers of well-known college football players, Yukel and Labrecque (2016) consider the focus of such online communities to be a hybrid of one's human brand and either an activity, product category or product brand. For instance, Instagram influencer and YouTube vlogger Chris Heria operates his own calisthenics gym, filming videos of fitness routines, technique demonstrations and street workout competitions. Though Heria's content involves an activity, he infuses the content with his own presentation

style, school of thought and personality. In Heria's absence, the content would possibly lose its value advantage over other content producers in the street workout community. Heria's offering involves an interaction between himself and calisthenics, garnering followers who share the same values of pushing one's body and mind to achieve their full potential.

Arvidsson and Caliandro (2015) argue that online spaces, such as social media, more than likely give rise to brand publics, a concept differing from brand communities where consumers congregate without interacting or forming a collective identity. A *brand public* is defined as "an organized media space kept together by a continuity of practices of mediation that are centered on a mediation device such as a hashtag" (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015, pg. 16). The authors argue that brand publics surround the notion of using a brand to enhance one's publicity rather than one's identity (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015). Twitter retweets and hashtags, for instance, allow consumers to publicize private information rather than spark interaction or discussion with other consumers (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015). In studying Twitter posts that each used the Louis Vuitton hashtag and included an image of a Louis Vuitton bag in the scene of an everyday experience, the authors concluded that the array of different experiences compose a collection of incongruent associations (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015). The incongruence among the images fails to communicate a collective brand identity and instead provides publicity for Louis Vuitton through an assemblage of a variety of meanings (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015). In the context of human brands posting images of different experiences, one could argue that the situation reverses: a human brand

stands as the focal point of the community, while the products, experiences and people in his or her posts form a constellation that creates and aligns with the human brand.

Both the arguments of Arvidsson and Caliandro (2015) and the current research echo the principles of liquid consumption by acknowledging the loose relationships formed through the quick, non-committal actions of social media users. However, the current research proposes an alternative view by arguing that liquid consumption does not change a consumer's needs but rather brings forth a change in the solutions for fulfilling needs. Rather than associating with a brand community to establish an identity in a physical setting, consumers establish identities through joining brand communities and perceiving digital relationships on social media. By identifying or connecting with an influencer, followers essentially demonstrate a feeling of similarity, in some way, with the influencer. Followers who congregate around a particular human brand presumably share a commonality, whether through interest, values, experiences or other elements. In other words, followers in a human brand community would perhaps share a consciousness of kind due to a given commonality.

Brand Communities and Social Identity

Psychological sense of brand community is grounded in social identity theory (Hogg et al., 1995). The core of social identity theory surrounds the concept that one's social category membership, along with the extent to which one feels they belong to a given social category, contributes to defining his or her self-concept (Hogg et al., 1995). Further, one's social category can dictate expected attributes, such as the way in which one should think or behave (Hogg et al., 1995). Through perpetuation of favorable in-group norms, members can achieve self-enhancement by viewing themselves and fellow

members in a positive way (Hogg et al., 1995). Social identity is argued to largely take presence in the cognitive space rather than in the social space; therefore, the belief that one belongs to a particular group does not have to be outwardly expressed through a role (Hogg et al., 1995). The notion aligns with a psychological sense of brand community among followers in that followers may often bear strong feelings of belongingness but take no measurable behavior to demonstrate their feelings.

Materialism in Brand Communities

Materialism, which tends to be associated with individualism, is usually not considered as a positive correlate with fellowship. Some have found community involvement and being "one with others" to be atypical of high materialists (Larsen et al., 1999). Consumers tend to be internally conflicted when they attempt to hold collective values, like family and religious values, while simultaneously maintaining the value of materialism (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002). However, in the same study, Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) found the tension influenced by the pairing of materialism and community values, like volunteering one's time to benefit others, was much lower than the tension influenced by the pairing of materialism and other collective values.

Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) attribute the outcome to two possible factors. The first possible factor lies in the public association with community values as opposed to the private association with other collective values (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002). The public nature of participating in community matters allows for the opportunity for others to see a volunteer's actions. When used to communicate a desired self-identity, high materialists may see a benefit in holding stronger community values.

The second possible factor lies in the distance between community values and one's daily life compared to the distance between other collective values and one's daily life (Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002). Family and religious matters are usually regarded as private matters to which one attends daily; community values are comparably held at a distance. However, the concept changes in the context of online consumption, where content and interaction opportunities incessantly infiltrate users' lives from all angles. Through pursuing the same brand, consumption goals or styles as other users, high materialists may be drawn to online, community-like spaces reminiscent of the fame, success or happiness reflected by influencers. High materialists may also be motivated to associate with or participate in online brand communities to satisfy the need for relatedness (Pieters, 2013).

Further, acquiring membership in an online brand community often entails little effort, a point that Lopez et al. (2017) uncovered while examining Twitter brand communities. Tapping a button to join and follow the activities of Twitter brand community profiles created by companies reflects the common simplicity of affiliating with brands (Lopez et al., 2017). Tapping a button to follow a social media influencer often differs little to none, requiring no effort to initiate a perceived relationship or community acceptance in the minds of materialistic followers. Though social media influencer profiles are seldom associated with or created by a company, the current research proposes that high materialists, more so than low materialists, may perceive connections with other followers through a psychological sense of brand community. Previous findings demonstrate a link between psychological sense of brand community and materialism. For instance, Flurry, Swimberghe and Parker (2014) found that highly

materialistic adolescents demonstrated high involvement in online brand communities compared to less materialistic adolescents. However, Kamboj and Rahman (2017) note an existing deficit in the literature for studies that examine the relationship between brand communities and individual differences, such as materialism, citing the need for further research.

In brand communities where members lack personal connections with other members, identification with the brand, compared to identification with other brand community members, more strongly influences a psychological sense of brand community (Carlson et al., 2008). Under the premises of social identity theory, high materialists, though individualistic in nature, would adhere to the collective sense of a group through depersonalization of self while maintaining their self-identity (Hogg et al., 1995). In other words, while the characteristics of a prototypical follower of a particular social media influencer may give rise to social stereotyping (an element of depersonalization of self), followers would undergo not an identity loss but a behavioral alignment with the in group (Hogg et al., 1995). Rather than shifting one's self-concept, a follower's existing self-concept becomes aligned with those of in-group others.

The role of materialism in strengthening psychological brand community among followers relates to a similar concept called communal-brand connection, which involves one's connection with other brand users (Rindfleisch et al., 2009). Consumers satisfy the need for personal relationships by connecting with either people or brands (Brick, Chartrand & Fitzsimons, 2017). Communal-brand connection and materialism have been examined in the context of high existential insecurity, where high materialists are more likely to form strong connections with brands as a way to cope with death anxiety

(Rindfleisch et al., 2009). High materialists already attaching to social media to fulfill cognitive and affective needs may be more likely to identify or feel connections with other followers as a way to cope with increasing liquidity, which entails a time of uncertainty and instability.

Human Brand Communities

Identification and connection with brands have been shown to strengthen one's identification with a corresponding brand community. Self-brand connection can lead to the formation of emotional bonds among group members (Schmitt, 2012). Followers with fulfilled needs for relatedness through connection with an influencer as a human brand may be more inclined to feel a psychological sense of brand community with other followers. After using a sample of online human brand community members, Thomson (2006) found that the focal human brand for an online community played a large role in members' lives compared to participants in a second sample who did not belong to such a community. Human brand community members revealed much stronger attachment scores to their corresponding human brands compared to non-community members in the second sample (Thomson, 2006).

Carlson and Donavan (2013) found that consumers who identify with a human brand who is associated with a team brand, such as in the context of an athlete and sports team, are more likely to join the individual's brand community. In Twitter communities surrounding object brands, personal-brand connection, or a connection between a consumer's self-concept and a brand's symbolic meaning, and communal-brand connection, or a feeling that one is similar to others who use a brand, positively influence

brand community identification, or a sense of belongingness among community members (Lopez et al., 2017). Thus, the current research proposes:

> *H2: The strength of a follower's self-human brand connection with an influencer will positively affect the strength of a follower's psychological sense of brand community, specifically within an influencer's human brand community.*

Purchase Intention

The current research proposes that the products and experiences an influencer posts could lead followers to purchase identical or similar products. Purchase intention is defined as a consumer's motivation to obtain a material product or initiate a paid experience. Influencers tend to include not only physical products but also life experiences in the content they create and post. More specifically, posts may focus only on a product, only on an experience or both a product and experience at the same time. The current research acknowledges two types of purchases consumers may make after seeing an influencer feature the same or similar value offerings in posts. Material purchases are defined as "those made with the primary intention of acquiring a material good: a tangible object that is kept in one's possession," such as clothing, jewelry, electronics and other objects (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003, pg. 1194). Experiential purchases are defined as "those made with the primary intention of acquiring a life experience: an event or series of events that one lives through," such as a concert, a museum trip, a day at the park and other happenings (Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003, pg. 1194). The current research proposes that factors such as self-human brand connection, a psychological sense of brand community, parasocial relationships and materialism could

influence a follower's intention to purchase products or engage in life experiences that an influencer posts.

Consumer Preferences for Experience

Consumers are increasingly seeing the value in experiences and ideas rather than in 'stuff,' (Bardhi et al., 2012). In access-based consumption, the focus of importance is on experience rather than on objects (Bardhi et al., 2012). All in all, both material products and experiential products can carry meaning. Material possessions can bear both public meanings—consensual meanings understood by most people in a society—and private meanings—subjective meaning bestowed by a certain person relative to his or her personal experiences (Richins, 1994). To communicate one's self-identity, consumers traditionally use material possessions with public meaning (Richins, 1994). Social media platforms allow consumers to exponentiate the connection of public meanings to their self-identities by including material possessions in posts. However, social media has also allowed consumers to easily communicate their self-identities by posting evidence of experiences.

One may post images of either material purchases or experiential purchases for the purposes of making good impressions on social media. Giddens (1991) believes consumers continue their behavior to not only see the reaction of others, though important, but also to keep up a particular narrative. A study by Lin et al. (2018) revealed that the focus on either a product or experience in a social media post makes a difference in how users perceive others. Consumers who post products on social media tend to be perceived as materialistic by their followers (Lin et al., 2018). However, while consumers posting purchases may not be received well by others, they achieve positive personal

outcomes. When users post content related to a recent purchase, whether material or experiential, the act of posting strengthens their perceptions that the purchase makes a difference in their self-identities and in their relationships with others (Duan & Dholakia, 2017). When users perceive the purchases they post have such an impact, they have increased happiness about the purchase (Duan & Dholakia, 2017).

In general, happiness related to experiential purchases has been shown to differ with age and experience type. Younger consumers are more likely to achieve greater happiness from extraordinary experiences, or uncommon events that occur infrequently in life, compared to ordinary experiences, or everyday events that occur frequently (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014). Younger consumers also perceive extraordinary experiences as more self-defining than ordinary experiences (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014). Ordinary experiences become increasingly both self-defining and happiness-generating as age increases (Bhattacharjee & Mogilner, 2014). Regardless of their frequency, experiences have been shown to help one define the self.

A conference abstract by Ling, Liu & Rajah (2016) found that experiential purchases usually lead to increased happiness for consumers due to their willingness to share information about their experiential purchases with others in the context of tourism. Contrarily, high materialists received less happiness from experiential purchases (Ling et al., 2016). While the abstract lends results that suggest high materialists may prefer to share material purchase information with others rather than experiential information, the brevity of the abstract does not justify the assumption (Ling et al., 2016). The abstract also does not specify whether one's willingness to share differs depending on the medium, such as a social media platform versus an in-person conversation.

Dematerialization and the rise of the desire for experiences rather than material goods signal a possible change in the materialism-experience paradox. High materialists may now find themselves more inclined to opt for a more liquid symbolism in the form of experiential purchases to maintain a social identity.

Parasocial Phenomena and Purchase Intention

Parasocial interaction has been shown to influence positive outcomes in the context of consumption. Schorath (2016) extended parasocial phenomena with celebrities into the digital realm, where the author found that parasocial interactions, compared to perceived similarities, more strongly determined whether users would follow a celebrity on Facebook or Twitter. Parasociality positively influences the product endorsement credibility of YouTube vloggers, leading subscribers to intend to purchase or actually purchase an endorsed product or service (Chapple & Cownie, 2017). All in all, modern society has designated lifestyle influencers as references for how one should behave (Puteri, 2018). Followers who admire influencer lifestyles are more likely to emulate the influencer in various ways, like eating at similar restaurants or buying similar products, out of the desire to establish a relationship with the influencer (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016; Burke, 2017). Parasociality tends to intensify a follower's emulation efforts (Tian & Hoffner, 2010; Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). In other words, upon developing a closeness to an influencer, a follower would feel more inclined to align their social identity and consumption behavior with the influencer. Additionally, consumers with a high need to belong remain more likely to form parasocial relationships with celebrity endorsers, in turn perceiving an endorser's advice about products to be equally as

credible as a friend's advice (Escalas & Bettman, 2017). Thus, the current research proposes:

> *H3: The strength of a parasocial relationship between a follower and an influencer will positively affect a follower's purchase intention for both (a) material goods and (b) life experiences featured in the influencer's content.*

Self-Human Brand Connection in Buying Behavior

The view of liquid consumption deems access-based products as temporary and accompanied by a lower likelihood for consumers to self-identify with the products (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). A lessening of identification with products may shift one's identification to other entities that can achieve one's goals of success or happiness, such as human brands. Products that an influencer features may still hold great importance, but influencers as human brands may largely influence purchase intention by placing the focus on maintaining a certain self-identity. Followers who identify with an influencer may be more likely to purchase the same products and engage in the same experiences to maintain a certain self-identity.

Carlson and Donavan (2017) found that a consumer identifying with an endorser exhibited a much stronger influence over whether a consumer purchased the endorsed product compared to perceived fit, sidelining some of the preoccupation associated with the role of perceived fit and the match-up hypothesis in product endorsements. Specifically, American football fans identifying with athletes as human brands were more likely to purchase products endorsed by the athlete, as well as team-related products, partially for the purpose of enhancing one's self-concept (Carlson & Donavan, 2017). In a study examining consumer motivations for brand switching after seeing an Instagram

influencer's product recommendation, consumers who switched due to social identification purposes viewed the influencer as a relatable person with whom they identified (Gulamali & Persson, 2017). Lastly, Thomson (2006) proposed that consumer attachment to a human brand in an endorsement would yield greater positive outcomes than both perceived fit between a product and an endorser and mere endorser likeability.

Social Comparison Theory

The current research considers social comparison theory as one way to explain a consumer's comparison and subsequent self-human brand connection with an influencer. Social comparison theory plays a role in a consumer's motivation to assess the self-identity of an influencer, compare oneself with the influencer's self-identity and acquire products and/or experiences that help one to achieve a desired self-identity (Festinger, 1954). Part of the theory's core surrounds the concept that people tend to compare themselves to others who are more similar to the way they perceive themselves (Festinger, 1954). The greater the importance placed on a characteristic of someone, the greater the likelihood that a person will evaluate the characteristic in a social comparison (Festinger, 1954). When similar others differ from a person on a specific characteristic, the person will likely aim to match his or her performance level on the specific characteristic with the performance level of the similar others (Festinger, 1954). Therefore, a follower who sees experiences as part of an influencer's social identity may try to engage in the experiences as well. Similar others can also include brand community members, who may also influence a follower's efforts to purchase certain products and experiences.

Self-Human Brand Connection and Purchase Intention

Products communicate meaning about a character's consumption, and the current research argues that experiences can also communicate meaning (Russell & Stern, 2006). Groups of material and experiential purchases create a constellation of products. Product constellations are defined as "clusters of complementary products, specific brands, and/or consumption activities used by consumers to define, communicate, and enact social roles" (Solomon, 1988, pg. 235). Consumers symbolically interact with material objects, sometimes changing them out for humans and vice versa, to form and maintain self-identities (Claxton & Murray, 1994; Toma, 2018). Humans can be objectified, and non-human entities can be anthropomorphized (Toma, 2018). Maintaining one's self-identity can involve replacing and reshaping pieces of the constellation, launching a continuous quest for the ideal mix of both humans and objects. Product constellations and self-brand connections follow the Gestalt concept in that a whole is greater than the sum of the parts (Solomon, 1988; Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Brand associations serve as parts that compose a brand concept, leading to self-brand connections when consumers integrate the set of brand associations into their self-concepts to reflect a certain identity (Schmitt, 2012). Products, services and experiences serve as parts that compose a product constellation, creating a social role through joint consumption (Solomon, 1988).

In the current research, influencers construct product constellations through the products and experiences they feature in social media content. By constructing and expressing particular product constellations, influencers are creating sets of brand associations for their own human brand concepts, or identities. Followers aiming to align themselves with an influencer's identity, due to either existing or desired similarity, form

self-human brand connections. The concept holds importance, for followers forming self-human brand connections may be more likely to engage in the same consumption behavior as the corresponding influencer by purchasing material and experiential elements of the influencer's product constellation. Further, because identification trumps the extent to which the endorsed product matches, or fits, with an influencer, a follower may shift focus from a specific influencer-product alignment instance to an influencer's holistic identity that involves products and experiences encountered and used in one's everyday lifestyle.

In summary, the symbolic meaning associated with the material products and life experiences an influencer shares can help to maintain his or her self-identity and enhance the human brand. In other words, a set of associations surrounding a brand can lead a consumer to engage in brand relationships and integrate the brand into his or her self-concept for self-identity purposes (Schmitt, 2012). In the current research, the synergy of a human brand and a product constellation may help an influencer to serve as a referent other for followers looking to maintain their own self-identities through consumption. Self-identity and other end states can fulfill needs through concepts such as self-brand connection. Attachment to a specific brand (in this case, a human brand) expresses self-brand connection and can positively influence one's intention to behave in a way that uses monetary resources, such as purchase intention (Schmitt, 2012). The symbolic meaning communicated by an influencer through the constellation he or she features may inspire followers who demonstrate strong self-human brand connections to seek out and make the same or similar purchases. Thus, the current research proposes:

H4: The strength of a follower's self-human brand connection with an influencer will positively affect a follower's purchase intention for both (a) material goods and (b) life experiences featured in the influencer's content.

Psychological Sense of Brand Community and Purchase Intention

A psychological sense of brand community may also positively affect material and experiential purchase intentions. A psychological sense of brand community has been shown to influence outcomes such as one's preference for the brand over competing brands and promotion of the brand through word of mouth (Carlson et al., 2008; Swimberghe et al., 2018). A sense of psychological brand community has been heavily studied in the arena of product or experience brands, but the concept is still being largely explored in the arena of human brands (Carlson et al., 2008; Carlson & Donavan, 2017). Consumers who demonstrate strong human-brand identification tend to model the behavior of the human brand, including purchasing a product endorsed by the human brand (Carlson & Donavan, 2017). A possibility exists that the outcomes of a psychological sense of brand community could apply to the products and experiences featured by human brands, like social media influencers. For instance, Dallas Cowboys fans who felt a strong psychological sense of brand community among other Dallas Cowboys fans were more likely to purchase a brand endorsed by a team player partially in an effort to maintain a sense of belonging to an in-group (Carlson & Donavan, 2017).

In general, communication sources perceived as highly similar to information receivers also tend to be perceived as credible, increasing the likelihood of effective communication (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970). Perceived similarity to other participants in an online forum increases a participant's purchase intention for a given product being

discussed in the forum (Prendergast, Ko & Yuen, 2010). Prendergast et al. (2010) offer social comparison theory to explain the findings, noting that a consumer who perceives others as similar to herself may also believe that her preferences align with the preferences of similar others. The alignment gives a sense of enhanced credibility to the similar others, influencing one's purchase intention (Prendergast et al., 2010). In the context of social media, exposure to other followers through "likes" and comments about an influencer's material and experiential purchases may positively affect a follower's intention to purchase. Thus, the current research proposes:

> *H5: The strength of a follower's psychological sense of brand community, specifically within an influencer's human brand community, will positively affect a follower's purchase intention for both (a) material goods and (b) life experiences featured in the influencer's content.*

Materialism and Material Purchase Intention

Consumers aiming to maintain a self-identity that aligns with another individual typically purchase products and brands similar to that of what the target individual purchases (Hogg et al., 1995). High materialists are traditionally more likely to purchase products to maintain their self-identities, along with meeting a host of other needs such as security and certainty (Rindfleisch et al., 2009; Richins, 2017). Millar and Thomas (2009) found that high materialists, compared to low materialists, receive greater happiness and assign greater self-relevance to material purchases. Though the current research proposes a shift in consumption amongst high materialists, the research also acknowledges that high materialists may still prefer solid consumption when given the ability to choose. Further, when human brands with which they identify feature a material purchase that

aligns with his or her self-identity, the high materialist will most likely desire to obtain the product to communicate symbolic meaning. A parasocial relationship between a high materialist and an influencer may strengthen material purchase intention, for the high materialist may be more inclined to engage in a parasocial relationship and subsequently enact emulation effort or place greater credibility on material product featuring.

A psychological sense of brand community may also play a role in influencing high materialist's material purchase intention for featured products. An image of the influencer with a material product may be reinforced by the behavior of other followers, such as leaving rhetorical comments or comments that directly address an influencer. Viewing evidence of other followers' attitudes and curiosity about objects, places and activities sends messages to less social followers about the interests of prosocial followers. Follower brand mentions and feedback about visiting a featured location helps to forms standards of consumption for a typical follower. An impression that not only the influencer but also the brand community members use certain products may strengthen the consensus of the product's symbolic meaning in the eyes of high materialists. Thus, the current research proposes that:

> *H6: Materialism will moderate the relationships between (a) parasocial relationship, (b) self-human brand connection and (c) psychological sense of brand community and material purchase intention, such that the relationships will be stronger for followers who are high materialists.*

Materialism and Experiential Purchase Intention

High materialists have traditionally preferred material products rather than experiences, expressing a lower willingness to pay for affairs such as travelling (Richins

& Dawson, 1992). Theoretically, the possessions owned by a consumer reflect his or her personal values (Richins, 1994). The possessions owned by high materialists should, therefore, reflect their personal value of materialism (Richins, 1994). The possessions high materialists value tends to be publicly consumed, representative of success or prestige, and typically unassociated with other individuals and sentimentalism (Richins, 1994). They are more likely to opt for possessions related to appearance rather than recreation (Richins, 1994). Low materialists were more likely to deem recreational possessions, like sports equipment or musical instruments, as important and recognize high value in possessions due to the comfort or pleasure they provide (Richins, 1994). Yet the possessions Richins (1994) studied were, in fact, possessions, not experiences.

In another piece published 23 years later, Richins (2017) stated that materialism is not a behavior, nor is it the sole consumption of luxury items. Materialism is the desire for more; one holds materialism as a value that guides his or her behavior in an effort to achieve personal goals (Richins, 2017). Though the core nature of materialistic value may remain the same (I want to focus on myself, and I want to communicate my success to everyone else), the presence of social media and increased liquid consumption are proposed to change the way high materialists communicate themselves to others (i.e. achieve personal goals). Part of a new high materialist communication may stem from undergoing experiences, even though high materialists may see a different type of value in experiences, similar to the way they see a different value in material possessions, then low materialists (Richins, 1994). Interestingly, Millar and Thomas (2009) found that one's resulting happiness from and perceived self-relevance in acquiring life experiences, such as skiing or visiting a theme park, did not significantly differ between high and low

materialists. The authors conclude that the results may stem from society's increasing desire for experiences and high materialists' perception that experiences, like objects, can be collected and used to enhance self-presentation (Millar & Thomas, 2009).

High materialists making offline social comparisons with similar people who are successful tend to purchase more luxury items, but the experiences of successful people may also be of interest to high materialists when seen on social media (Mandel, Petrova & Cialdini, 2006; Richins, 2017). The current research proposes that influencers with which materialistic followers identify, as well as perceive to have a parasocial relationship, positively affect the likelihood that a materialistic follower will make an experiential purchase. For instance, a high materialist who perceives a certain social media influencer to be similar to him or her may be inspired to attend a performance of *The Nutcracker* after viewing a post of the influencer attending the same performance. The association between the influencer and *The Nutcracker* may communicate that the experience of attending *The Nutcracker* plays an important role in the influencer's identity. In turn, the perceived relationship between the experience and influencer identity may strengthen the likelihood that the high materialist will pay for the experience, allowing him or her to continue the alignment of themselves with the influencer. High materialists who feel a sense of belongingness with other followers in a human brand community may also be more inclined to engage in featured experiences in the midst of increasing liquid consumption. Though high materialists traditionally prefer using objects to communicate their identities, the increased use of experiences by referent others may spur high materialists to follow suit.

High materialists may also increasingly gravitate toward experiences, including the instance noted above, over material products due to the capabilities offered by social media platforms. Social media offer a way to display the acquisition of experiences, as items like photographs are often used to lend tangibility to experiential possessions (Belk, 1985). Social media also maintain and further the importance of experience. Consumers posting images or videos of themselves participating in daring, strenuous or rare experiences may be aiming to build their experiential CVs (Keinan & Kivetz, 2010). Specifically, collecting experiences, even experiences that may be painful or unpleasant, can become the pursuit of consumers with a high productivity orientation, or a need to fill time spaces with events that reflect achievement (Keinan & Kivetz, 2010). Consumers high in productivity orientation measure their self-worth by their experiential accomplishments, viewing upcoming experiences as more opportunities to enhance their self-images (Keinan & Kivetz, 2010).

While Keinan and Kivetz (2010) did not necessarily propose a connection between materialism and building one's experiential CV, the authors did suggest a further look at materialism, social comparison and collectable experiences. Experiential purchases posted on social media actually trigger more envy from users who see the content compared to posts that contain material purchases (Lin et al., 2018). The findings point to the human desire for participation and the need for social relatedness (Lin et al., 2018). The findings may also hint at the rising trend of consumers' experiential preferences and social media's ability to increase the collectability of experiences.

Recent research lends insight on the relationship between high materialists, experiential purchases and social media. Low materialists tend to post experiential

purchases rather than material purchases on social media, while high materialists hold equal preferences for posting material and experiential purchases (Duan & Dholakia, 2018). Duan and Dholakia (2018) attribute the results to consumers' ability to display material and experiential purchases through social media. The current research found fault with one issue. Duan and Dholakia (2018) treated the purchase types as means to communicate wealth. However, materialism does not automatically indicate conspicuous consumption, and the experiential and material products influencers feature do not necessarily align with conspicuous consumption (Richins, 2017). For instance, Ingrid Nilsen's image of her walk home with a plastic CVS bag of purchased items demonstrates her ability to transform an ordinary store visit into an appealing experience. Duan and Dholakia's (2018) findings do at least offer a glimmer of support for further study of materialism and experiential consumption.

Concluding Thoughts on High Materialists and Experiences

Symbolic consumption to achieve a self-identity demonstrates materialism (Shrum et al., 2013). Further, Larsen et al. (1999) believe that consumers can develop greater materialism through efforts of maintaining a product constellation. Though dematerialized, liquid consumption can still be materialistic. Instead of concerns about physical products, consumers worry about their digital products— "likes," followers, shares, online interactions, or the content being consumed, created or posted. Consumers also worry about their experiential products—using ridesharing to help the environment, taking yoga to stay mindful, visiting the art crawl every month to stay cultured. Consumer worries, though not material in nature, can still be materialistic. Acquired experiences shape and affect the image consumers want to project, the lifestyle

consumers want to achieve and the people consumers want to be. High materialists may assign the transformative powers they anticipate in material purchases to experiential purchases as well (Richins, 2012).

When influencers embodying the achieved goals of highly materialistic followers integrate experiences in content, the perceptions and purchase intentions of highly materialistic followers may significantly change. A strongly held value of materialism does not necessarily conflict with the desire for experience. The concept relates to Belk's (1985) original assertion that experiences can count as possessions. High materialists can acquire experiences to achieve consumption goals and satisfy needs with the subsequent digital collection formed on social media. Thus, the current research proposes:

> *H7: Materialism will moderate the relationships between (a) parasocial relationship, (b) self-human brand connection and (c) psychological sense of brand community and experiential purchase intention, such that the relationships will be stronger for followers who are high materialists.*

Conclusion

The current research explores two main issues: (1) the way in which high materialists cope with the increase of liquid consumption and (2) the effect of influencers on consumption patterns of high materialists. Influencers on social media construct narratives through content they post over time, connecting with followers who identify with their personal preferences and life events. High materialists who follow influencers have the opportunity to view them as friends, identify with them, and purchase featured material and experiential offerings to emulate the influencer's perceived success or happiness. Should brand managers segment consumers by the dominant materialism facet

reflected by consumer behavior, brand managers may be able to communicate in a way that better addresses the concerns of a given facet (Segev et al., 2015). For instance, an influencer who is seen as a flashy entrepreneur may appeal to brand managers who market products associated with prestige and money making. In an influencer-to-follower context, consumption-oriented content infused with an influencer's daily experiences may help to communicate the influencer's life satisfaction, encouraging followers high in centrality acquisition to strive for the same outcome (Segev et al., 2015).

As the rise of liquidity infiltrates society, consumers are trading in the security of solid, ownership-based products for more liquid, access-based products, many of which now exist in a digital sense (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Materialistic consumption has previously been viewed as solid. However, in an environment of increased liquidity, high materialists may instead acquire intangible possessions to signal success or happiness, like earning fame or receiving positive feedback on posts from followers. Social media allows high materialists to get both "friends" and a digital collection of possessions in the form of reactions, views and other elements.

Proposed Contribution

In a general sense, the proposed contribution of the current research lies in the presentation of a different lens through which one can view materialistic consumption. Studying high materialists' perceptions of intangible acquisition on social media may lend valuable insight on how these consumers are shifting their consumption behavior in a digital world. In the conceptual framework, illustrated by Figure 2-2, several contributions exist as well. Qualitative interviews present information on current Instagram users and the ways in which influencers inspire them to purchase certain

brands and product types. Quantitative findings reveal high materialists' tendencies to form relationships with human brands in an online setting. Moving a high materialist's focus from object brands to human brands presents an opportunity to broaden his or her view in terms of brand consideration and brand switching to maintain product constellations.

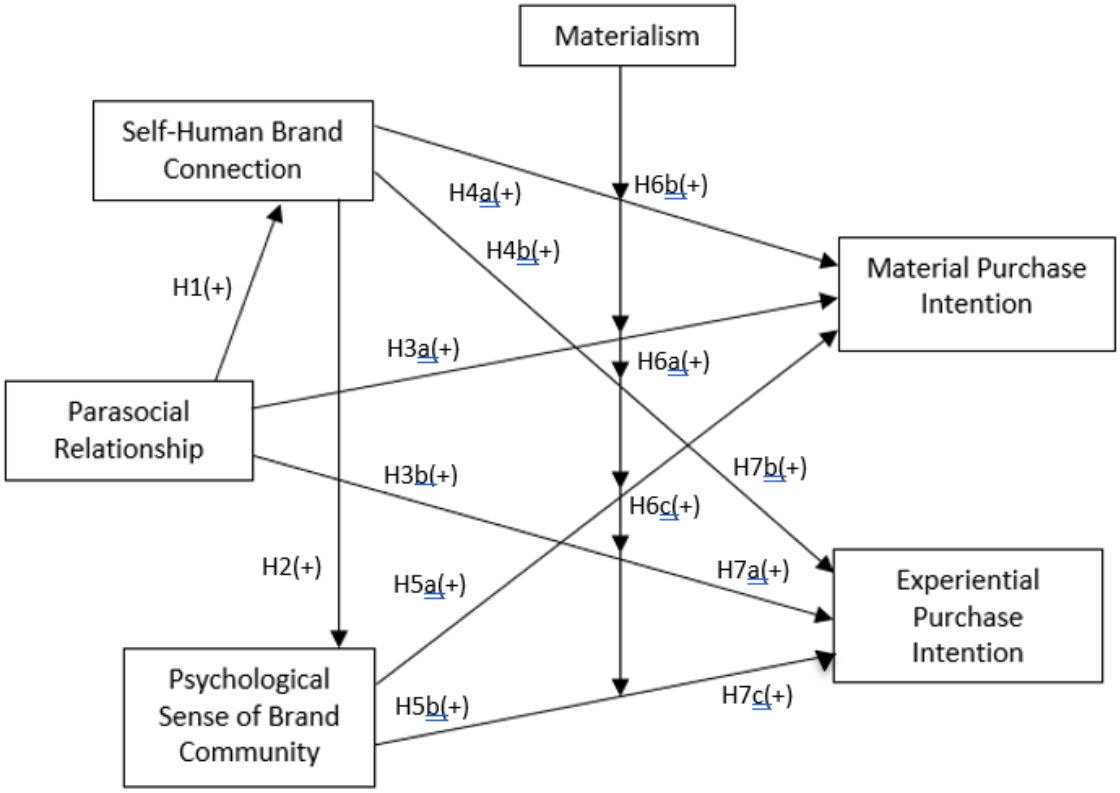

Figure 2-2 Conceptual Framework

The research also lends insight on whether high materialists join online brand communities for human brands in an attempt to emulate or associate with others who appear successful or happy. Managers can apply findings to refine influencer marketing tactics, including whom they target for paid partnerships and which brands match well with theirs to build product constellations. For instance, high materialists may be drawn

to macro influencers, where they can consume content, emulate the influencers through the purchase of similar material and experiential products, and avoid pressure to socialize with other followers. The result provides reasoning for relationships between a strong psychological sense of brand community and high materialists.

The current research also unveils an alternative view of materialism as a personal value. Liquid consumption and digitality, along with the growth of the sharing, knowledge and service economies, contribute to the widening chasm between material goods and materialistic purchases. Material goods remain relics of solid consumption and ownership; materialistic purchases, on the other hand, encompass consumption that signals desired images to others, meaning life experiences now play an important role in the product constellations of the high materialist. High materialists may be inspired to participate in more life experiences if they see influencers participating.

Managerially, the perceived alignment among an influencer's brand, the branded product and the audience stands as an important consideration to marketing managers when engaging in influencer marketing for clients (Childers et al., 2018). In a managerial sense, brands may find that a greater emphasis on experiential marketing, a practice in which managers create an experience to promote a material product brand, appeals to high materialists, especially when an experience offers opportunities for documentation through photography, geotags and other elements that can be used on Instagram. Carter and Gilovich (2012) believe experiences, compared to material products, open themselves to more facets of positive consumer evaluations. In other words, consumers can view experiences in a variety of ways, remembering the rainy day at the beach as a time of bonding inside the condo with friends over board games and laughter.

Experiential elements also offer more ways for merchants of material products to add value.

By studying liquid consumption on social media, the research provides a clearer picture of high materialists' thoughts on digital possessions. Researchers can gain insight on whether the acquisition of such fulfills high materialists' needs in ways similar to the acquisition of physical objects. Findings allow social media platforms, both existing and emerging, to understand how they can offer more technology features that lengthen the customer lifetime value on a given platform. By allowing users to acquire digital objects of personal meaning, social media platforms can ensure users continue to see them as a source of acquisition and self-identity formation.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The current dissertation conducted a preliminary qualitative study and a subsequent quantitative study to examine the relationship between follower perceptions and purchase intention. The qualitative study explored followers' perceived identification and parasocial relationships with Instagram influencers, as well as the followers' previous material and experiential purchases inspired by influencers. The current dissertation conducted a quantitative study by online survey to examine the moderation of materialism in the relationship between three variables (parasocial relationship strength, self-human brand connection and psychological sense of brand community) and purchase intention. The quantitative study examined the relationships within the entire conceptual framework to assess how a follower's perceived connections with an influencer and a follower's degree of materialism affect the likelihood that followers will purchase or consume featured material products and experiences on Instagram. The current methodology chapter provides the procedures and reasoning for each study.

Qualitative Study

The current research conducted a qualitative study using a grounded theory approach to assess whether concepts such as parasocial phenomena and self-human brand connection held a presence in the relationship between a social media influencer and his

or her followers. The grounded theory approach blends established theory with fresh research domains, combining the guiding lights of existing concepts with new qualitative findings (Goulding, 2005). The author employed theoretical sampling based on the principles of liquid consumption theory underlying follower perceptions and interactions with influencers and other followers (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Goulding, 2005). Twenty-nine undergraduate business students participated in preliminary open-ended survey questions online in exchange for a $15 payment. All respondents were contacted to participate in follow-up interviews to gather further details on respondents' initial thoughts written in the online survey. Eleven respondents agreed to answer further questions in 15-minute follow-up interviews. The remaining respondents either declined to answer further questions or failed to respond to additional contact. Appendix A contains all of the questions that were asked during the online survey and follow-up depth interviews.

Qualitative Analysis and Results

The final sample of 11 respondents contained three males and eight females, aged 20-22 years. All names have been changed to reflect pseudonyms. Interviews were manually transcribed before being concept coded using the qualitative research software NVivo 12. The concepts unearthed through coding brought several matters to light. First, the experiences described by many of the respondents suggest that the proposed constructs under study in the current research (such as parasocial relationships, self-human brand connections and a psychological sense of brand community) do exist and are perpetuated by the interactions between influencers and followers. Second, the ways in which the constructs express themselves differ among respondents. For instance, the

similarities a follower perceives between herself and an influencer may be much different from the similarities another follower perceives. Or, the reasoning attributed to one's belief of a psychological sense of brand community may differ among followers depending on the factors each individual recognizes. Third, the presence of every construct fails to hold in certain instances. Some respondent accounts reveal that while a few of the constructs exist in influencer-to-follower and follower-to-follower relationships, such as self-human brand connection and psychological sense of brand community, other constructs under study, such as parasocial relationships, may weakly present themselves or remain nonexistent. The pattern suggests that parasocial relationships remain nonessential for the formation of self-human brand connection and psychological sense of brand community.

Parasocial Relationships with Influencers

The current research first explored the issue of whether followers formed parasocial relationships with influencers. More than half of the respondents feel as though they know an influencer they follow to some degree. While all respondents remain aware that neither they nor the influencers personally know one another, some respondents experience an intense feeling of knowing the influencer. Devin, a respondent who follows influencer Robert Terkla, recalls seeing the YouTube and Instagram personality in a restaurant parking lot, compelling him to walk over for a conversation:

"I wanted to go talk to him, but I was like, I had to take a step back and I was like, I don't know this guy, he doesn't know me...So yes, I guess to some point, I kind of feel like I know him."

The influencer practice of dotting one's content narrative with topics that most followers regard as sensitive or moderately private stands as one strengthening element for perceived parasocial relationships. For instance, Kristopher noted that he now feels closer to Famouslos32, the Instagram sports analyst he follows, after seeing content about marriage and fatherhood peppered throughout the influencer's usual line of comedic basketball posts. Rachel, who follows influencer Brighton Keller, said she feels closer to Brighton through her inclusion of content on personal struggles and negative life events.

Contrary to followers who perceive relationships with influencers, some respondents feel a small or nonexistent sense of friendship with influencers. Feelings range from a complete lack of perceived friendship to an acquaintanceship, expressed in phrases such as "just a follower," "less than an acquaintance," and "a subscriber." Respondents acknowledge the improbability of forming a close relationship with the influencer due to the magnitude of follower counts, meaning the management of thousands of individual relationships for one influencer would be unrealistically challenging and likely undoable. Some respondents also emphasize the functionality in influencer content, such as the benefit of product information rather than perceived emotional connections. A few respondents also recognize the "staged" aspect of influencer content, meaning influencers may structure their scripts and images to generate relationships with followers. Meredith, who follows the lifestyle influencer couple Jo and Kemp, remains aware of the falsities social media platforms can present in regards to knowing someone:

"I do feel like I know them, but at the same time I don't. With Instagram, you only allow your followers to see what you want them to see. So yes, I get to know the good

parts of their lives, the parts they *want* to share, but I don't see so much. Overall, I really don't know them. There is so much more to a person than their Instagram feed."

An aversion to parasocial relationships also takes presence in some respondent experiences, such as with Bailey, a follower of influencer Emma Chamberlain, who physically recoiled and stated that thinking about spending time with an influencer would be "weird." Overall, respondent accounts suggest that parasocial relationship strength exists on a continuum, with a variety of factors, such as the motivation for following an influencer and the propensity to form imagined bonds with media personalities, as possible determinants of an individual's place on the continuum. Different media formats may also play a role. For instance, some of the respondents consume an influencer's content in both video and still image formats to differing degrees, which may affect the closeness one develops to an influencer.

Similarities and Connections with Influencers

Next, the current research explored instances resembling follower identification or connection with an influencer. Similarities stand as important elements in the mix of follower consumption and influencer content. Almost all respondents share similarities, such as personal values, interests, sense of style, places of origin, experiences and personality traits, with an influencer. Several respondents share at least one common personal value, like optimism or determination, with influencers they follow. Teagan, who follows influencer Jackie Aina, appreciates themes of inclusion interwoven throughout the content, from Jackie's featured makeup products that appeal to a wide range of skin tones to the way the influencer humbly addresses her followers, and recognizes the same themes in the way she lives her own life. Jamie, who follows

influencer Kristin Johns, attributes her motivation for following Kristin to the religious values they share:

"Someone who followed her...said that she was a Christian, and that's kind of what led me there."

Respondents do not necessarily have a similar personality when compared to a given influencer, but respondents do find commonalities among individual personality traits, such that a respondent perceives both oneself and an influencer to be "creative," "easygoing" or "sarcastic." Respondents note that some of the influencers they follow hail from the same region (e.g. "southern") or state (e.g. "Texas," "Louisiana"). Identification also exists by way of seeing an influencer undergo experiences similar to one's own, evident in Devin's account:

"...a lot of things can go wrong with him, say something happens with his boat while he's in the middle of the lake. And he just kind of laughs about it, and it's funny because it happens to me while I'm out fishing. Things are going to happen to me that are wrong, and you just kind of have to laugh about it."

Overall, the importance of respondents' similarities lies in the perceived relevance between a follower's identity and a human brand's identity. Most of the respondents began following a given influencer partially for a discovered commonality, such as an alignment of fashion sense or sports. While respondents experience identification with influencers from the beginning of following them, some respondents are also in the process of further aligning their identities with influencers. The aligning of identities manifests itself in a multitude of ways, such as in the case of Madi, who sees influencer

Savannah LaBrant as a role model and aims to emulate the influencer's positive attitude. Other respondent remarks echo similar notions:

"I like the way, like, she decorates her house. It kind of feels like the way that I'm, like, kind of would do mine." (Rachel)

"I like watching him because his content is interesting, and it's, it's almost admirable...cause I can see myself being in his shoes if I were, if I were to be, like, in the same, like, circumstance. You know what I mean?" (Niles)

"I guess, if I was striving to be an influencer, it would probably be her." (Jamie)

Psychological Sense of Brand Community Among Followers

After gathering information on the presence of self-human brand connection, the current research explored the possible existence of a psychological sense of brand community among followers when an influencer stood as the human brand. All of the respondents feel a sense of community among followers of a given influencer, expressed in (1) perceived common interests, (2) written and/or oral interactions, (3) artifacts and (4) initiatory experiences. Some respondents cite a linkage among users by a common decision to follow an influencer, implying that similarities across followers indicates a sense of union. Rachel feels as though Brighton's followers are a group of people all interested in the same areas in which Brighton is interested. Niles perceives a common way of thinking among followers of influencer Cody Ko:

"Yeah, that's one of the things that I also enjoy is, like, going through the comments, and seeing how other people kind of have my similar trains of thought than me."

Other respondents noted a manifestation of community in written or oral interactions. Madi describes the comments on Savannah's posts as notes of gratitude for the ways the influencer's guidance has inspired followers to lead more positive lives. Upon seeing others' comments, Madi seems to receive a sense of oneness in her journey to improve her attitude, as many others employ the influencer's advice to fight the same daily battles. Jamie sees community in the way Kristin interacts with followers on video:

"...a lot of times I'll see her go live, and it's like, 'well a lot of y'all have DM'd me for this,' and that's how she almost always opens is with people who have DM'd her or asked her questions. And so when she opens with that, it's as if she's saying, I see each of you, or I know that, based on your questions, it must be that most everyone who follows me wants to know about his particular thing, so I'll talk about it."

Artifacts branded to an influencer also act as a way followers can foster and express community. Products, such as apparel, can be adorned with an influencer's well-known quirks, such as FamousLos32's catchphrases, and followers sporting the products can further merge themselves with the influencer's identity. Lastly, Becca, who follows travel influencer Ciara, believes that she became part of the follower community only after experiencing the same trip the influencer featured. Ciara showcased her travels and offered advice to Becca, who aspired to emulate Ciara in an exploration in Mexico. Becca's experience serves as an initiatory feat granting her belongingness to a community of other followers who share a unique understanding. Overall, an influencer's connection with a follower seems to flow into a sense of community, interwoven with the binds of common interest and respect for a profile's symbolic meaning.

Experiential and Material Purchase Intentions

Finally, the current research explored the link between an influencer featuring experiential and material products and a follower subsequently purchasing the experiential or material product. Only two respondents report partaking in an experience after seeing an influencer engage in the same experience. Rachel visited a coffee shop on a trip to Dallas, Texas, after seeing Brighton share her own visit on Instagram. Becca went on an adventure to Mexico after watching Ciara walk the same paths beforehand. One reason for the low amount of followers emulating influencer experiences lies in the attainability of the experiences that influencers feature. While Rachel's coffee shop visit conveniently fit into her travel plans, Devin's wish to attend the same African hunt as an influencer failed to come to fruition due to a lack of affordability and time.

Six respondents recall purchasing material products, such as makeup, skincare formulas and clothing, that an influencer featured. While influencers blatantly mention some product brands with Instagram tags or with ancillary apps such as LIKEtoKNOW.it, they sometimes fail to mention other products, which then have to be scoped out by followers. Bailey finds accounts created by followers whom she dubs "hardcore," meaning the particular followers not only consume content but also devote resources to create content about the influencer for the benefit of other followers. For instance, a "hardcore" follower may release a video about the articles of clothing worn by an influencer in his or her last post. The "hardcore" follower will have tracked the brand and price of the influencer's clothing articles and shared the information with viewers. Though some influencers engage in paid partnerships, or mentioning a brand for payment, respondents who have followed such influencers for a prolonged amount of

time (especially with followings beginning before the influencer gained greater popularity) typically remain unfazed by the commercialized endeavors. The established authenticity and trust between an influencer and follower seem to ease the introduction of paid partnerships, though the study of such remains beyond the scope of the current research.

In general, every respondent saw the influencer as a human brand. Respondents noted that the human brands of the influencers comprised the distinguishing iniquities' in an influencer's behavior and the goods, places and ideas he or she features. When an influencer stars in a media segment or places her name on a makeup kit, respondents noted that they automatically want to consume the offering due the meaning transferred from the influencer to the associated elements. An influencer's idiosyncrasies and the products he or she continues to consume work to maintain one's human brand, such as Bailey's note of Emma Chamberlain's content:

"...she has things that only Emma does, like she edits her videos a certain way, or she...goes to vegan restaurants and, like, goes to get coffee…"

The people, places, objects and ideas in an influencer's life combine to build and maintain his or her narrative, similar to the use of a product constellation. An influencer constructs a self-identity, and the meaning transfer helps to link the constellation's elements. Kaitlin, who also follows influencer couple Jo and Kemp, acknowledges the concept in saying that "...the products that they promote define them."

Conclusions

Respondent accounts of following influencers offer insight that helps to accomplish several objectives of the current research. First, some followers do form

parasocial relationships with influencers. Parasocial relationships can range from nonexistent to very strong, depending on the follower. Many respondents began following a particular profile due to perceived similarities between themselves and the influencer. Identification with an influencer sparks further identity alignment as followers learn information about specific topics, choose which information to incorporate into their own lives through various modes of consumption and perceive bonds with other followers. Followers can sense community among other followers by seeing follower comments and listening to the way an influencer addresses the audience. Followers are inspired to engage in the same experiences influencers feature, but followers only engage when they are able to travel to a particular location or pay for the experience. Followers also seek out identical or similar material goods that influencers have featured, even when the brands are not mentioned or tagged in a post.

Quantitative Study

As a follow-up to the preliminary qualitative study, the current research conducted survey research with the aim of maximizing the study's generalizability. From a broad perspective, many similarities exist among most Instagram influencers, lending a set of heuristics followers use to recognize someone as an influencer. However, at the most detailed level, one could argue that every Instagram influencer is unique. Content format, posting frequency, covered topics, life story and personality vary to different degrees among all influencers. The variance poses a challenge for researchers examining a sample of Instagram followers from the general population, for each respondent could differ based on the influencer he or she follows. Therefore, several data collection methods were proposed in the current dissertation with the aim of reducing confounds.

After careful methodology considerations, the author collected a sample through a panel of respondents from the United States. The author conducted an online cross-sectional survey, collecting data in the context of Instagram as the target social media platform. Instagram currently serves as a prominent platform for influencer marketing. The vast majority of social media influencers in early 2018 considered Instagram their primary platform for collaborating with brands (eMarketer, 2018). The number of Instagram posts marked "#Ad" totaled 226,000 solely for December 2018, up from 158,000 #Ad posts in December 2017 (Klear, 2019). Monochrome, a Finnish company that leads influencer marketing campaigns for brands, recognizes Instagram as an effective platform where consumers prefer to spend time, some of which is dedicated to receiving ideas and inspiration from influencers (Biaudet, 2017).

To recruit an appropriate sample, the survey required each respondent to have a personal Instagram account and follow a lifestyle influencer. Respondents were requested to choose their most preferred lifestyle influencer on which to answer the survey questions. Respondents were provided with the definition of a lifestyle influencer to increase the likelihood of choosing appropriate influencers on which to base their answers. Though the influencers respondents follow may differ on an array of levels, respondents answered questions about influencer characteristics for categorization and provided the influencer's Instagram handle for post hoc investigation. Also, though the main study involves the use of covariance-based structural equation modeling to analyze cross-sectional data, the proposed structural model remains based on the theory of liquid consumption and, as a result, stands as an appropriate candidate for analysis with structural equation modeling.

The sample size included at least 10 respondents for each parameter estimated in the model to reduce the severity of any issues arising from non-normal data (Hair et al., 2019). Additionally, the sample size well exceeded the number of measured variables, maintaining the ability for the author to conduct maximum likelihood estimation during analysis (Hair et al., 2019).

The current research also predicted that age may lead to some variance in terms of acquiring digital possessions. Consumers in their late 50s through late 60s exhibit a lower likelihood to include digital objects as elements of their extended selves (Cushing, 2012). In February 2019, Pew Research Center reported that 75 percent of Americans aged 18 to 24 years used Instagram, standing as the age group with the largest percentage of users (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). Conversely, only 23 percent of Americans aged 50 to 64 years used Instagram (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). Therefore, the sample for the current research included respondents from across generations. The author also conducted a pretest for all measurement scales using Amazon Mechanical Turk respondents.

In light of recent controversial events involving Facebook, Instagram's parent company, the researcher carefully monitored news events before and during the data collection period to ensure an absence of any incidents that could possibly affect an Instagram user's perceptions of the platform or company. Measures were also taken to ensure that Instagram did not alter any of its functional features, introduce new features or change rules significantly affecting user experience during the data collection period.

Quantitative Measurement Scales

The Outcomes

The experiential purchase intention scale comprises three seven-point items adapted from Hultman et al. (2015) and one seven-point item adapted from Hornik and Diesendruck (2017). The material purchase intention scale, adapted from Coyle and Thorson (2001), comprises four seven-point items. All items are anchored by "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," with the exception of one experiential purchase intention item that is anchored by "very much" and "not at all." Classifying a post as exhibiting a particular purchase type remains largely relative. A follower's perceptions of a post can determine whether the nature of the content is material or experiential, and perceptions may shift from follower to follower. For instance, when viewing an image of an influencer standing in a meadow of bluebonnets, one follower may focus on the material elements, such as an influencer's accoutrements, while another follower may focus on the experiential elements, such as the beauty of the setting in which the picture was taken. Consumer perception carries the greatest weight in whether a post surrounds either a material or experiential purchase. Therefore, the survey questions prompted respondents to reflect on purchases that had already occurred. Appendix B provides all items for each scale used in the quantitative study.

The Predictors

Parasocial relationship strength was assessed by the parasocial relationship scale, which was adapted from Russell and Stern (2006) and de Berail, Guillon and Bungener (2019) and comprises thirteen seven-point items. Psychological sense of brand community was assessed by both the psychological sense of brand community scale by

Swimberghe et al. (2018) and Carlson et al. (2008), which comprises five seven-point items, and the communal-brand connection scale by Keller (2003), which comprises four seven-point items. Self-human brand connection was assessed by both the self-brand connection scale, which was adapted from Escalas and Bettman (2003) and comprises seven seven-point items, and the human-brand identification scale by Carlson and Donavan (2013) and Bergami and Bagozzi (2000), which comprises two items (one seven-point visual item, anchored by "complete overlap" and "far apart," and one seven-point item, anchored by "very much" and "not at all"). All other scales are anchored by "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree."

The Moderator

The materialism scale by Richins (2004) comprises 15 seven-point items across the three dimensions of acquisition centrality, acquisition as the pursuit of happiness and possession-defined success. All scale items are anchored by "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree." Though the Material Values Scale (Richins and Dawson, 1992) remains widely used, the scale has exhibited reliability issues in a few cross-cultural studies. In a comparison of materialism differences across Danish, French and Russian consumers, item loadings reveal missing or combined dimensions in some instances and a neatly loaded, three-dimensional structure in other instances (Griffin, Babin & Christensen, 2004). While some differences may stem from symbolic meaning in the connection between people and their possessions, one could argue that deficiencies in the materialism scale itself may be partially responsible (Griffin et al., 2004). Results from another study also questioned the dimensionality of the materialism scale, as success and centrality loaded on a single dimension across Polish and American samples (Tobacyk et

al., 2011). Richins' (2004) work on the revision of the MVS makes mention of improved dimensionality in the 15-item scale, as well as in the short-form scales. The current research employed the 15-item scale for fit assessment with the understanding that achieving three separate dimensions of materialism may pose a challenge.

The Characteristics

To assess a respondent's habits of posting images of material or experiential purchases on Instagram, a two-item scale by Barasch, Zauberman and Diehl (2018) measured one's intention to share a life experience on Instagram, and another two-item scale by Barasch et al. (2018) measured one's intention to share a product purchase on Instagram. Measurement for a respondent's number of Instagram followers and number of Instagram users followed included two open-ended, self-developed items that request respondents to enter numerical figures. A scale by Lin et al. (2018) used to measure the frequency of Instagram activities comprises three seven-point items, anchored by "all the time" and "less than once a month." One seven-point item, anchored by "more than 3 hours" and "fewer than 10 minutes," by Lin et al. (2018) measures average time spent on Instagram daily in the past week. Additionally, respondents provided basic demographic information, including annual income, age, education level and gender. Each respondent also provided the chosen influencer's Instagram handle for verification of follower quantity and other variables. Respondents were asked to refer to their Instagram accounts through their preferred devices.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSES AND RESULTS

Covariance-based structural equation modeling stands as the chosen technique for addressing the proposed hypotheses of the current research. CB-SEM is an appropriate analysis technique, as well as better addresses the proposed hypotheses over an alternative technique such as hierarchical regression, for several reasons. Structural models, as opposed to traditional regression techniques, employ a theoretical base to explain a set of relationships (Hair et al., 2019). The theory of liquid consumption encompasses each part of the proposed model, intertwining the latent constructs that surround need fulfillment through digital connections and intangible elements. In response to liquid consumption critics, CB-SEM can provide justification for the application or abandonment of liquid consumption as a useful theory. The current research aims to demonstrate how well the theory of liquid consumption illustrated by the overall structural model aligns with observed reality, which elicits a differing approach from traditional ways of focusing on single relationships between variables (Hair et al., 2019). The author used CB-SEM as a confirmatory modeling strategy to determine the degree to which the proposed model mirrors the observed perceptions and intentions for followers of influencers. Though theory drove the proposed model, the author assigned a hypothesis to each line between each pair of latent constructs for the sake of neatness and convenience.

Additionally, CB-SEM offers advantages by allowing one to include latent constructs within a given model, which reduces measurement error and enables a more accurate measurement of abstract concepts, such as a psychological sense of brand community (Hair et al., 2019). While some researchers may opt for analysis of variance techniques to assess moderation, CB-SEM allows moderators of the current research to also be examined with greater consideration for measurement error (Hair et al., 2019).

The current research involved a two-step approach for CB-SEM, which allows for validation of measures before testing theory (Hair et al., 2019). The author first conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to assess the measurement model, examining the degree to which each indicator represents its corresponding construct (Hair et al., 2019). After assessing the validity of the measurement model, the author examined the proposed relationships by specifying and assessing the validity of the structural model. The author then conducted a multigroup analysis to assess the proposed effects of materialism as a moderator. The author treated materialism as a categorical construct by using the highest and lowest quartiles of the distribution as two independent samples. The author conducted all analyses using SPSS AMOS software.

Quantitative Pilot Study

The current research first included a pilot study to test the survey structure and scales. Eight hundred one respondents were recruited using Amazon Mechanical Turk. The sample only included respondents who lived in the United States, who posted on their Instagram accounts at least once every few months and who held a human intelligence task performance ranking of at least 90%. Respondents were paid $3.63 to complete the 30-minute survey to encourage quality responses. One hundred ten

respondents were removed after data collection due to presenting copious amounts of missing data, failing to meet survey qualifications, failing to pass the attention check, completing surveys within coordinates lying outside of the United States and reporting nonsensical answers to open-ended questions. The final sample consisted of 691 respondents and represented the appropriate population for the context of the current research. The sample characteristics, presented in Table 4-1, included both male and female respondents (61.2% and 38.6%, respectively), as well as one respondent who identified as non-binary. Respondents reported a mean age of 35 years. Almost 50% of respondents had earned a bachelor's degree, followed by 18.7% of respondents who had earned a master's degree or higher.

Table 4-1

Pilot Study Sample Characteristics

Characteristic		**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Gender			
Male		423	61.2 %
Female		267	38.6%
Non-Binary		1	0.1%
Age			
18 - 24		30	4.3%
25 - 34		362	52.4%
35 - 44		198	28.7%
45 - 54		64	9.3%
55 - 64		31	4.5%
65+		6	0.9%
Education			
Some High School		1	0.1%
High School/Equivalent		66	9.6%
Some College		92	13.3%
Associate's Degree		58	8.4%
Bachelor's Degree		345	49.9%
Master's Degree		120	17.4%
Doctorate Degree		9	1.3%

Table 4-1 (continued)

Annual Household Income		
Less than $20,000	41	5.9%
$20,000 to $34,999	92	13.3%
$35,000 to $49,999	145	21%
$50,000 to $74,999	198	28.7%
$75,000 to $99,999	131	19%
$100,000 to $149,999	63	9.1%
$150,000 or more	20	2.9%
Instagram Daily Average Usage		
Fewer than 10 minutes	74	10.7%
10 - 30 minutes	213	30.8%
31 - 60 minutes	190	27.5%
1 - 2 hours	107	15.5%
2 - 3 hours	51	7.4%
More than 3 hours	56	8.1%
Instagram Posting Frequency		
Less than once a month	101	14.6%
One to three times a month	142	20.5%
Once a week	97	14%
Several times a week	96	13.9%
Once a day	91	13.2%
Several times a day	105	15.2%
All the time	59	8.5%

Pilot Study: Exploratory Factor Analysis

Before conducting an exploratory factor analysis on all scale items used in the pilot study, the author conducted a test of normality on each scale item. The author converted the kurtosis and skewness score for each item to a Z score before comparing each score to a critical value of ∓ 1.96. Non-normality appeared evident in nearly all of the survey items; however, with consideration of a large sample size and nature of the items, the effect of non-normality was assumed to be negligible. Next, the author conducted a common factor analysis with orthogonal rotation on items from all hypothetical constructs.

To assess overall construct validity, convergent validity was established by ensuring that the factor loadings of each construct item loaded on a single factor with a loading score either above or approaching 0.60 and communalities either above or approaching 0.50 (Hair et al., 2019). Items demonstrating low factor loadings and low communalities were removed from the factor analysis. Reliability was examined using Cronbach's alpha, inter-item correlations and item-to-total correlations. The items for each construct exceeded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.70, suggesting adequate reliability (Hair et al., 2019). Inter-item correlations for all construct items exceeded a benchmark of 0.30, while item-to-total correlations for all constructs exceeded a benchmark of 0.50, suggesting adequate construct validity (Hair et al., 2019).

To establish discriminant validity, a correlation matrix was examined to assess correlations among the sum scores for all constructs. Most of the correlations, ranging from 0.62 to 0.73, revealed at least a moderate level of discriminant validity among the constructs. However, correlations among self-human brand connection, parasocial relationship strength and psychological sense of brand community ranged from 0.73 to 0.78, sparking multicollinearity concerns.

Upon further investigation, the author conducted a series of three regressions, each involving one construct as an outcome variable and the remaining two constructs as predictor variables. A minimum tolerance of 0.38 and maximum variance inflation factor of 2.57 among the three constructs confirmed the presence of moderate multicollinearity. Condition index scores remained below 15, with no more than one variance proportion exceeding 0.90 per regression. Given the nature of the items on each construct, one could argue that strong correlations among self-human brand connection, parasocial

relationship strength and psychological sense of brand community are inevitable. To rule out potential interference of common method variance, Harman's single factor tests were conducted on the three constructs. The results indicate extracted variance greater than 50% on the first eigenvalue, lending support for the presence of common method variance. As a precautionary step to alleviate common method variance in the main study, question blocks containing construct items were rearranged in the survey to place greater distance between the highly correlated constructs.

The materialism construct, in particular, yielded unexpected results. The author conducted an EFA with oblique rotation set to reflect three factors, in accordance with the three theoretically supported materialism dimensions of possession-defined success, acquisition centrality and acquisition as the pursuit of happiness. The resulting three-factor pattern matrix reveals positively worded scale items for the success and centrality dimensions loading on the first factor, negatively worded scale items for all three dimensions loading on the second factor and two positively worded happiness items loading on the third factor. The author deleted an additional happiness item that cross loaded on the first and third factors before conducting a second-round EFA. The pattern matrix for the second-round EFA, illustrated in Table 4-2, mirrors the three-factor solution reached in the first-round EFA. Aside from the two happiness items loading on the third factor, the items seem to load by differences in wording valence rather than by the three theoretically established dimensions of materialism.

Table 4-2

Materialism Values Scale Three-Factor Pattern Matrix Loadings

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Possession-Defined Success Items			
1. I admire people who own expensive homes, cars and clothes.	0.831		
2. Some of the most important achievements in life include acquiring material possessions.	0.844		
3. I don't place much emphasis on the amount of material objects people own as a sign of success.		0.762	
4. The things I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life.	0.796		
5. I like to own things that impress people.	0.889		
Acquisition Centrality Items			
6. I try to keep my life simple, as far as possessions are concerned.		0.742	
7. The things I own aren't all that important to me.		0.720	
8. Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure.	0.684		
9. I like a lot of luxury in my life.	0.783		
10. I put less emphasis on material things than most people I know.		0.735	
Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness Items			
11. I have all the things I really need to enjoy life.		0.593	
12. My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have.			0.690
13. I wouldn't be any happier if I owned nicer things.		0.656	
14. I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things.			0.648

Noting an emerging pattern of factors dependent on positive and negative item wording, the author conducted a subsequent EFA with oblique rotation, setting the analysis to reflect two fixed factors. The author included the cross-loading happiness item previously removed in the three-factor EFA. The first materialism factor contains positively worded items surrounding personal values highly associated with material acquisition, and the second materialism factor contains negatively worded items surrounding personal values with little emphasis on material acquisition. The resulting factor structure, displayed in Table 4-3, can be attributed to one of several elements. First,

the pristine splitting of positively and negatively worded items can happen when one of the factors stems from a methods flaw (referred to as an *artifactual factor*).

Table 4-3

Materialism Values Scale Two-Factor Pattern Matrix Loadings

Items	**Factor 1: Positively Worded Items**	**Factor 2: Negatively Worded Items**
Possession-Defined Success Items		
1. I admire people who own expensive homes, cars and clothes.	0.807	
2. Some of the most important achievements in life include acquiring material possessions.	0.845	
3. I don't place much emphasis on the amount of material objects people own as a sign of success.		0.727
4. The things I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life.	0.814	
5. I like to own things that impress people.	0.861	
Acquisition Centrality Items		
6. I try to keep my life simple, as far as possessions are concerned.		0.716
7. The things I own aren't all that important to me.		0.727
8. Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure.	0.766	
9. I like a lot of luxury in my life.	0.855	
10. I put less emphasis on material things than most people I know.		0.718
Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness Items		
11. I have all the things I really need to enjoy life.		0.632
12. My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have.	0.707	
13. I wouldn't be any happier if I owned nicer things.		0.702
14. I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things.	0.754	
15. It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can't afford to buy all the things I'd like.	0.726	

Single constructs measured with items of a polarized nature, or in others words, items that survey the extreme ends of a continuum rather than the moderate middle, can exhibit two separate factors during factor analysis (Spector, Katwyk, Brannick & Chen,

1997). For instance, respondents who deliver a highly materialistic self-report may agree to a high extent with positively worded items and agree to a very low extent on negatively worded items. Respondents who self-report very low levels of materialism would express an opposite but equally extreme scoring pattern, agreeing with negatively worded items and disagreeing with positively worded items. Moreover, respondents who identify as moderate materialists may disagree with both positively and negatively worded items. Respondents of each materialism level—high, low and moderate materialists—could develop a tendency to respond consistently to scale items of a particular polarity, leading to the emergence of a two-factor structure (Spector et al., 1997).

Previous literature notes the occurrence of such factor structure when using the Materialism Values Scale to make comparisons in cross-cultural studies (Wong, Rindfleisch & Burroughs, 2003). When examining the CFA model fit results for American respondents, the authors found a strong positive correlation between the factor reflected by positively worded items and the factor reflected by negatively worded items (Wong et al., 2003). Contrarily, the two materialism factors are negatively correlated, sometimes to a large extent, for East Asian respondents, and thus, suggest the presence of two separate constructs (Wong et al., 2003). Wong et al. (2003) attribute the issue of materialism items with mixed wording to cultural bias. Specifically, American respondents perceive the positively and negatively worded items to stand in opposition to each other, while East Asian respondents perceive the items in a more holistic fashion (Wong et al., 2003). Yet the relationships between the two materialism factors that hold in some East Asian countries in Wong et al.'s (2003) study hold for the current research,

which only involved American respondents. For instance, a CFA testing a two-factor materialism structure in the main study of the current research reveals a weak, negative correlation estimate (- 0.12) between the positively worded construct and the negatively worded construct.

The correlation pattern for materialism, illustrated in Table 4-4, aligns as one would expect in the presence of a suspected artifactual factor, with strong correlations for items of the same polarity and weak correlations for items of a differing polarity (Spector et al., 1997). However, a few characteristics of the factors provide an alternative reason for the resulting structure. Regarding the nomological validity of the items in the resulting factor structure, the positively worded materialism factor aligns with personal value expression. The positively worded items signal a strong focus on acquiring physical possessions or enjoying luxury. The positively worded items align almost perfectly with the Richins (2004) nine-item scale. An array of alternatives exists for the meaning of high scores on the negatively worded items, ranging from the notions of minimalism and experientialism to environmentalism and so on. The negatively worded factor seems to align with Eckhardt and Bardhi's (2019) ongoing development on the downplaying of physical items and the ever-increasing focus on knowledge and experiences. Due to the theoretical differences between the factors, the current research treats each factor as a separate construct, using only the positively worded items to indicate materialism. However, the factor with negatively worded items still appears in the main study CFA for materialism to confirm the two-factor structure.

Table 4-4

Materialism Item Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations

	M	SD	S1	S2	S3 (R)	S4	S5	C1 (R)	C2 (R)	C3	C4	C5 (R)	H1 (R)	H2	H3 (R)	H4	H5
S1	4.60	1.77	—														
S2	4.24	1.87	.725**	—													
S3 (R)	3.19	1.75	.307**	.306**	—												
S4	4.59	1.70	.675**	.717**	.290**	—											
S5	4.44	1.86	.723**	.723**	.261**	.710**	—										
C1 (R)	2.94	1.54	.242**	.205**	.593**	.216**	.244**	—									
C2 (R)	3.68	1.87	.103**	-.022	.510**	.082*	-.022	.488**	—								
C3	4.81	1.60	.631**	.598**	.268**	.631**	.657**	.211**	.118**	—							
C4	4.54	1.78	.691**	.718**	.240**	.669**	.742**	.212**	.017	.661**	—						
C5 (R)	3.18	1.69	.148**	.084*	.557**	.101**	.091*	.571**	.525**	.168**	.116**	—					
H1 (R)	3.01	1.53	.084*	.069	.449**	.066	.034	.497**	.424**	.097*	.079*	.402**	—				
H2	4.89	1.66	.516**	.593**	.222**	.546**	.528**	.182**	.070	.535**	.585**	.117**	.266**	—			
H3 (R)	3.55	1.84	.074	.018	.548**	.055	.031	.452**	.492**	.069	.071	.446**	.468**	.251**	—		
H4	4.99	1.67	.574**	.559**	.231**	.592**	.584**	.227**	.109**	.624**	.636**	.150**	.210**	.767**	.286**	—	
H5	4.77	1.75	.562**	.539**	.175**	.550**	.580**	.165**	.020	.581**	.583**	.083*	.226**	.639**	.150**	.676**	—

*(*p<0.05, **p<0.01)*
Negatively worded items are denoted by (R).

Quantitative Main Study

After adjusting the survey and measures based on the pilot study results, the current research then included a subsequent main study. One thousand respondents were recruited using Dynata. The sample only included respondents who lived in the United States and who posted on their Instagram accounts at least once every few months. In consideration of both the full study analysis and multi-group analysis, the sample size collected meets the minimum sample size requirement of 150 respondents per group given the number of constructs, moderate communality levels and the absence of single-item measures (Hair et al., 2019). Respondents were compensated by Dynata to complete the 30-minute survey to encourage quality responses. Respondents were removed after data collection due to considerable amounts of missing data for items of key constructs and nonsensical answers to open-ended questions. After the removal of five responses, the final sample consisted of 995 respondents and represented the appropriate population for the context of the current research. The sample characteristics, presented in Table 4-5, include both male and female respondents (44.5% and 55.3%, respectively), along with two respondents not identifying as male or female. Respondents reported a mean age of 45 years. Also, 33.5% of respondents have earned a bachelor's degree, followed by 20.1% of respondents who have earned a master's degree or higher.

Table 4-5

Full Study Sample Characteristics

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	443	44.5%
Female	550	55.3%
Other	2	0.2%
Age		
18 - 24	113	11.4%
25 - 34	195	19.6%
35 - 44	180	18.1%
45 - 54	173	17.4%
55 - 64	169	17%
65+	165	16.6%
Education		
Some High School	19	1.9%
High School/Equivalent	173	17.4%
Some College	170	17.1%
Associate's Degree	100	10.1%
Bachelor's Degree	333	33.5%
Master's Degree	173	17.4%
Doctorate Degree	27	2.7%
Annual Household Income		
Less than $20,000	114	11.5%
$20,000 to $34,999	120	12.1%
$35,000 to $49,999	100	10.1%
$50,000 to $74,999	213	21.4%
$75,000 to $99,999	165	16.6%
$100,000 to $149,999	171	17.2%
$150,000 or more	112	11.3%
Instagram Daily Average Usage		
Fewer than 10 minutes	194	19.5%
10 - 30 minutes	293	29.4%
31 - 60 minutes	214	21.5%
1 - 2 hours	154	15.5%
2 - 3 hours	70	7%
More than 3 hours	70	7%
Instagram Posting Frequency		
Less than once a month	234	23.5%
One to three times a month	180	18.1%
Once a week	123	12.4%
Several times a week	137	13.8%
Once a day	115	11.6%
Several times a day	115	11.6%
All the time	91	9.1%

Normality assessments of each item through conversion of kurtosis and skewness scores to Z scores revealed a vast number of non-normal items in the dataset. Given that many of the items relate to relational phenomena that a given individual would likely experience to some degree, non-normality seems expected and appropriate. Additionally, the magnitude of the sample size in the main study—at least 10 respondents per estimated parameter—suggests an expected mitigation in issues that can stem from non-normality (Hair et al., 2019).

Full Study: Confirmatory Factor Analysis

After assessing normality, the author conducted a full study confirmatory factor analysis with all 995 respondents. The unconstrained model reflects a statistically significant chi-square statistic of 1,666.94 ($p < .05$) with 314 degrees of freedom. While a significant and large chi-square statistic suggests poor fit, larger sample sizes and models of higher complexity tend to inflate the chi-square statistic, which may help to explain the resulting chi-square statistic in the CFA. The CFI of 0.953 and the RMSEA of 0.066, along with the other fit statistics displayed in Table 4-6, indicate good fit relative to the sample size and number of variables contained in the model (Hair et al., 2019). The standardized residual covariances do not exceed an absolute value of 2.8, further supporting the notion of good fit (Hair et al, 2019).

Table 4-6

Full Study Measurement Model Fit Statistics

Fit Measures	
X^2 Goodness-of-Fit	1,666.94
Degrees of Freedom	314
CFI	0.953
NFI	0.943
TLI	0.947
RMSEA	0.066

All standardized factor loadings exceed 0.70 ($p < 0.001$) (displayed in Figure 4-1), the average variance extracted for each construct (displayed in Table 4-7) exceeds 0.50 and construct reliability for each construct exceeds 0.70, suggesting convergent validity (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 4-7

Full Study Measurement Model Validity Statistics

Construct	**Construct Reliability**	**Average Variance Extracted**
Parasocial Relationship Strength	0.897	0.636
Self-Human Brand Connection	0.951	0.737
Psychological Sense of Brand Community	0.963	0.767
Material Purchase Intention	0.941	0.799
Experiential Purchase Intention	0.929	0.813

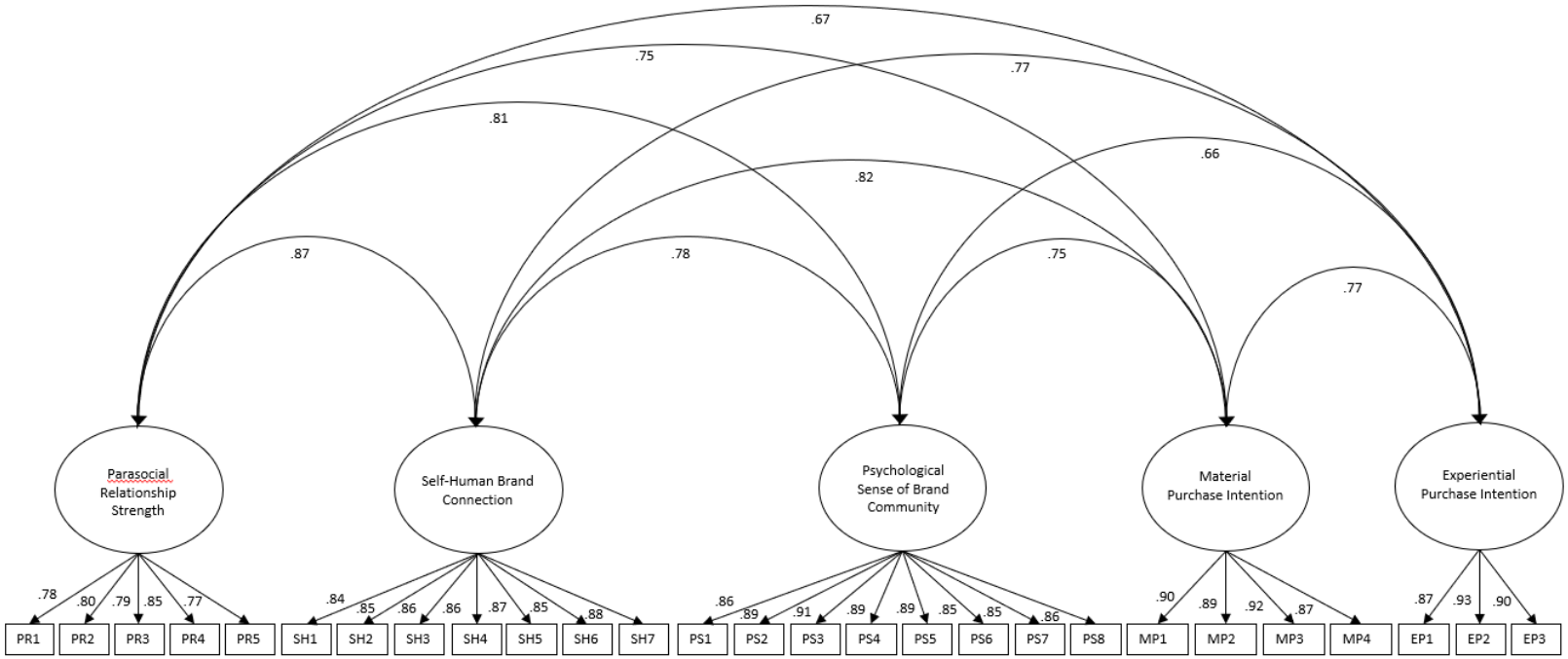

Figure 4-1 Full Study CFA Measurement Model

The AVE for almost every construct exceeds the associated squared correlation estimates (displayed in Table 4-8), indicating discriminant validity for most constructs (Hair et al., 2019). The squared correlation estimate for parasocial relationship strength and self-human brand connection fails to exceed the AVE of both constructs, suggesting a lack of distinction between the two. The lack of discriminant validity resembles a moderate case of multicollinearity between the two constructs, similar to the multicollinearity found in the pilot study EFA results. By definition, parasocial relationship strength and self-human brand connection are similar yet separate constructs, setting the expectation of higher shared variance between the two. The model fit falls within acceptable levels, suggesting such lack of discriminant validity to be negligible. However, to alleviate the persistent possibility of measurement issues between parasocial relationship strength and self-human brand connection in subsequent tests, the author assessed two alternative models.

The first alternative model included a constrained parameter estimate of one between parasocial relationship strength and self-human brand connection. The more restricted model results reflect a chi-square statistic of 1693.20 ($p < 0.05$) with 315 degrees of freedom. A significant chi-square difference of 26.26 ($p < 0.001$) suggests a significant worsening in model fit when constraining the parameter estimate between the two latent constructs. Yet the CFI of 0.952, the TLI of 0.946 and the RMSEA of 0.066 fail to show a substantial worsening in fit. Therefore, the author proceeded to test a second alternative model that included a single latent construct reflecting all of the items from both parasocial relationship strength and self-human brand connection. Given a chi-square statistic of 2,226.91 ($p < 0.05$) with 318 degrees of freedom, along with the CFI of

0.933, the TLI of 0.927 and the RMSEA of 0.078, the model fit seems to significantly worsen when combining items from both latent factors to form a single construct. A results comparison suggests that two separate constructs, rather than a single construct, better reflect the parasocial relationship strength and self-human brand connection items (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 4-8

Full Study Measurement Model Correlation Estimates

	PRS	SHBC	PSBC	MPI	EPI
Parasocial Relationship Strength	—				
Self-Human Brand Connection	0.867	—			
Psychological Sense of Brand Community	0.810	0.776	—		
Material Purchase Intention	0.746	0.824	0.754	—	
Experiential Purchase Intention	0.673	0.771	0.656	0.772	—

Full Study: Structural Model Specification

After achieving acceptable fit and construct validity in the full study CFA, the author respecified the structural model, illustrated in Figure 4-2, in accordance with the proposed hypotheses of the current research. Next, the author compared the structural model fit and the CFA model fit with a chi-square difference test to assess significant changes in fit. As shown in Table 4-9, the chi-square statistic for the full study structural model is 1,854.97 ($p < 0.05$) with 316 degrees of freedom.

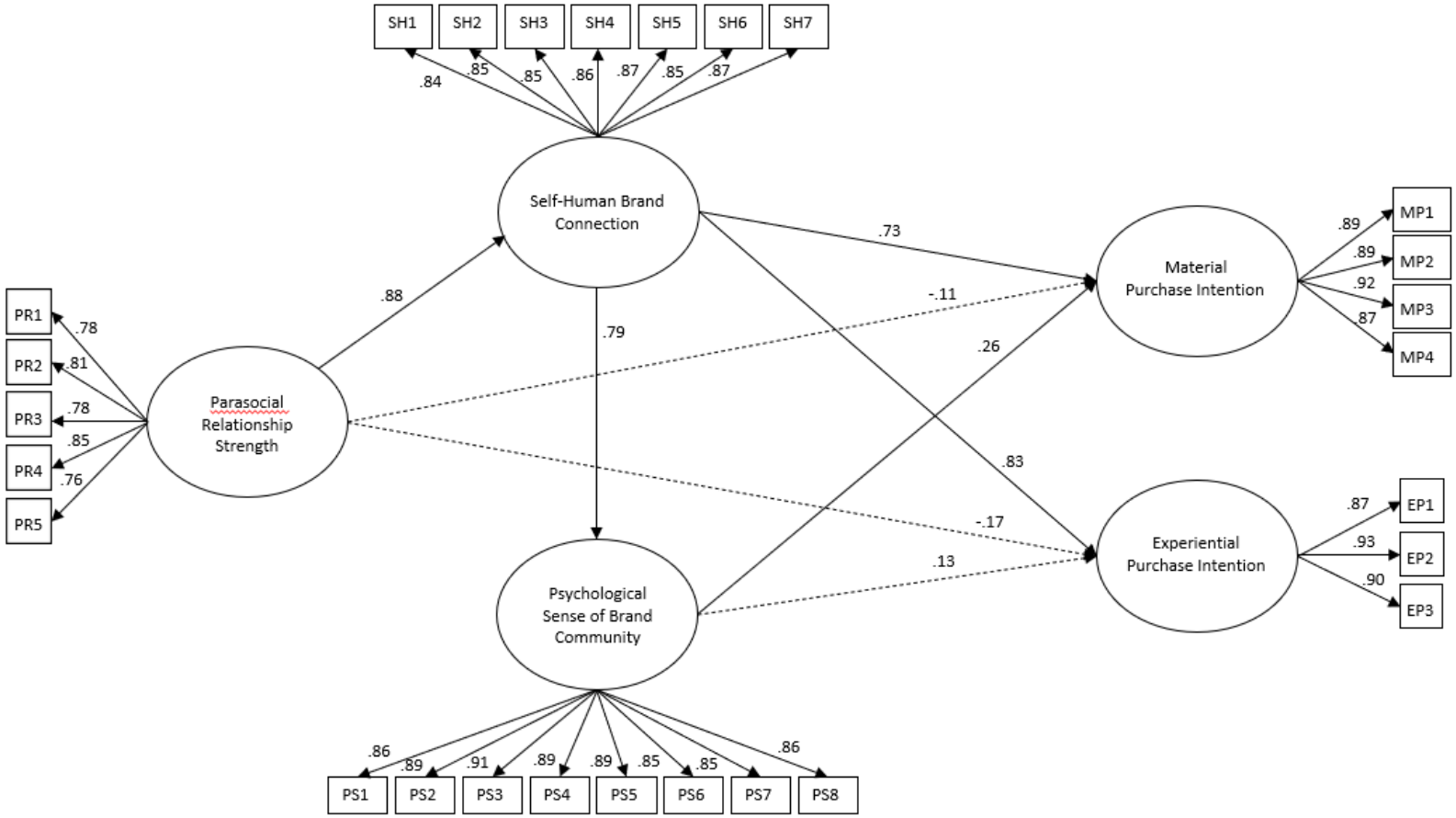

Figure 4-2 Full Study Structural Model

The statistically significant chi-square difference between the structural model fit and the CFA model fit indicates that imposing constraints to the CFA model significantly worsens fit. Alternatively, the adjusted theoretical fit index remains close to zero at 0.007, suggesting that fit may not be as severely worsened as the significant chi-square difference indicates (Hair et al., 2019). The ATFI lends support to proceed with the current results.

Table 4-9

Full Study Model Fit Comparison

Model	X^2	**df**	**CFI**	ΔX^2	**ATFI**
Full Study CFA	1,666.94	314	0.953	—	—
Full Study Structural	1,854.97	316	0.946	188.03 ($p < .000$)	0.007

Table 4-10 reflects the fit statistics for the full study structural model. The CFI of 0.946 and the RMSEA of 0.070 indicate moderate goodness of fit relative to the sample size and number of variables contained in the model (Hair et al., 2019). The factor loading estimates for each latent construct reflect no major changes from the factor loading estimates in the CFA (with the largest change at 0.011), indicating no sign of interpretational confounding (Hair et al., 2019). Parameter estimates for all structural relationships, displayed in Table 4-11, show statistical significance ($p < .05$), but not all of the relationships move in the predicted direction or express a large effect size. For instance, parasocial relationship strength seems to weakly lessen a follower's material ($\gamma_{\text{parasocial-material}}$= -0.11) and experiential purchase intentions ($\gamma_{\text{parasocial-experiential}}$= -0.16), contrasting Hypotheses 3 and 4, which predicted a strong, positive influence from

parasocial relationship strength. Psychological sense of brand community positively influences experiential purchase intention ($\beta_{\text{psychological-experiential}}$= 0.12), but the extent to which the construct influences the outcome appears weak. All other proposed relationships move in the predicted direction and demonstrate moderate to strong loadings.

Table 4-10

Full Study Structural Model Fit Statistics

Fit Measures	
X^2 Goodness-of-Fit	1,854.97
Degrees of Freedom	316
CFI	0.946
NFI	0.936
TLI	0.940
RMSEA	0.070

Table 4-11

Full Study Structural Model Estimates

Structural Path	**Standardized Regression Weight** *(*p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001)*
Parasocial Relationship Strength -> Self-Human Brand Connection	0.882***
Self-Human Brand Connection -> Psychological Sense of Brand Community	0.793***
Parasocial Relationship Strength -> Material Purchase Intention	- 0.111*
Parasocial Relationship Strength -> Experiential Purchase Intention	- 0.166**
Self-Human Brand Connection -> Material Purchase Intention	0.730***
Self-Human Brand Connection -> Experiential Purchase Intention	0.831***
Psychological Sense of Brand Community -> Material Purchase Intention	0.259***
Psychological Sense of Brand Community -> Experiential Purchase Intention	0.126**

After assessing the structural model fit and path loadings, the author added age as a covariate to assess the effect of age on material and experiential purchase intentions. As previously mentioned, older consumers are less likely to consider digital objects as elements of their extended selves, leading one to suspect that the acquisition of experiences on social media may also lack appeal for older consumers (Cushing, 2012). Upon assessment of the added covariate, the covariate path estimate failed to achieve significant and strong loadings, succumbing to deletion from the structural model.

In conclusion, the significance, size and direction of the parameter estimates of the structural model suggest support for H1, H2, H4a, b and H5a, synopsized in Table 4-12. The results also suggest that H3a, b and H5b are not supported.

Table 4-12

Full Study Structural Model Conclusions

Hypothesis	**Tested Relationship**	**Result**
H1	Parasocial Relationship Strength -> Self-Human Brand Connection	Supported
H2	Self-Human Brand Connection -> Psychological Sense of Brand Community	Supported
H3	Parasocial Relationship Strength -> Purchase Intention	Not Supported
H4	Self-Human Brand Connection -> Purchase Intention	Supported
H5	Psychological Sense of Brand Community -> Purchase Intention	Supported for Material Purchase Intention

Materialism Grouping Variable: Confirmatory Factor Analysis

An EFA conducted with the pilot study data revealed a two-factor structure for materialism, with one factor containing the positively worded items and a second method factor containing the negatively worded items. Therefore, a confirmatory factor analysis

was used to confirm the factor structure of materialism. The author conducted two separate CFAs, with models illustrated in Figures 4.3a and 4.3b, to test fit for a model with materialism expressed by two factors (the positively worded items predicted by one latent factor and the negatively worded items predicted by another latent factor) and a model with materialism expressed by three factors (possession-defined success items predicted by one latent factor, acquisition centrality items predicted by a second latent factor and acquisition as the pursuit of happiness items predicted by a third latent factor).

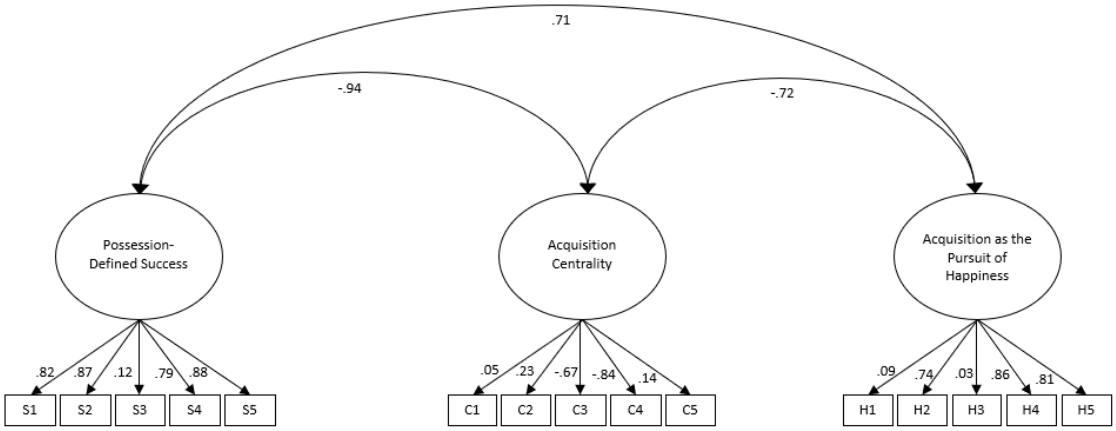

Figure 4-3a Three-Factor Materialism CFA Model

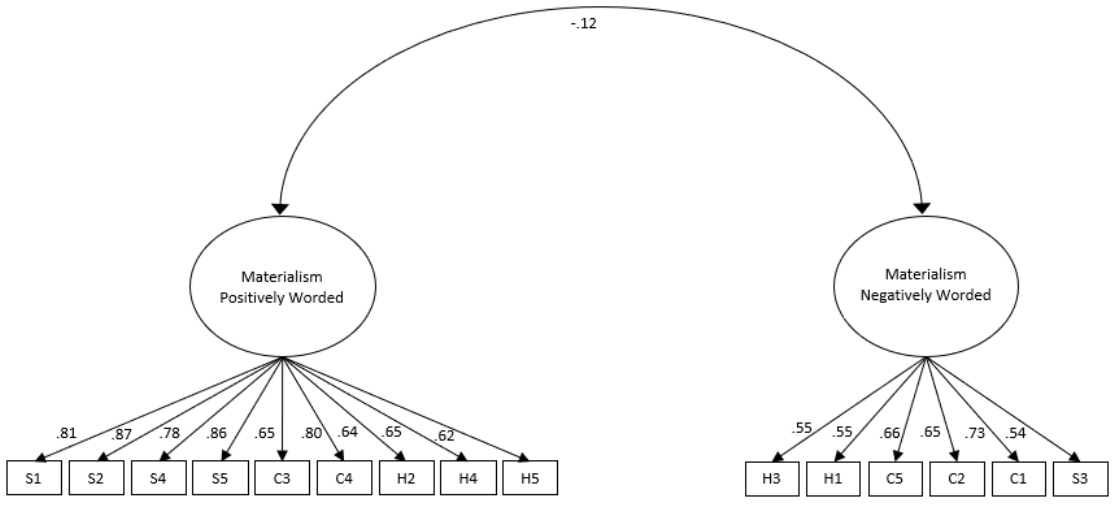

Figure 4-3b Two-Factor Materialism CFA Model

The initial three-factor model shows poor fit measures, including a significant chi-square statistic of 1,868.26 ($p < 0.05$) with 87 degrees of freedom, a CFI of 0.765 and a RMSEA of 0.144. Further, possession-defined success remains the only of the three factors to achieve convergent validity, and all three of the factors fail to achieve discriminant validity. Additionally, the negatively worded items on each dimension displaying either insignificant factor loadings ($p < .05$) or significant but low factor loadings. The insignificant and low factor loadings succumbed to deletion from the model, leaving only the nine positively worded items theoretically belonging to each of the three dimensions.

The three-factor model fit assessed after negatively worded item deletion fits well, including a significant chi-square statistic of 261.64 ($p < 0.05$) with 25 degrees of freedom, a CFI of 0.959 and a RMSEA of 0.098, but seems to lack discriminant validity between the success and centrality dimensions. All loadings of the respecified three-factor model remain above 0.7, the construct reliabilities remain above 0.7 and the AVEs remain above 0.5, exhibiting convergent validity for all three dimensions. However, only the dimension reflecting the three positively worded items of acquisition as the pursuit of happiness achieves discriminant validity. The success and centrality dimensions fail to achieve discriminant validity, with AVEs of both dimensions falling below the related squared correlation.

As for the two-factor model assessment, a significant chi-square statistic of 1,126.82 ($p < 0.05$) with 89 degrees of freedom, the CFI of 0.863 and the RMSEA of 0.108 suggest poor fit (Hair et al., 2019). Both factors achieve construct reliabilities of at least 0.70, but only the factor reflecting the positively worded items achieves an AVE of

at least 0.50, suggesting convergent validity for the factor. A squared correlation estimate falling below the AVE for both factors establishes discriminant validity. Table 4-13 illustrates the fit indices for each model.

Table 4-13

Materialism CFA Model Fit Comparison

Measures of Fit	**First-Order Models**				
	Two Factors		**Three Factors (Initial)**		
X^2 Goodness-of-Fit	1,126.82		1,868.26		
Degrees of Freedom	89		87		
CFI	0.863		0.765		
NFI	0.853		0.757		
TLI	0.838		0.716		
RMSEA	0.108		0.144		
CR	Pos 0.919	Neg 0.785	Suc 0.849	Hap 0.677	Cen 0.243
AVE	Pos 0.562	Neg 0.381	Suc 0.570	Hap 0.392	Cen 0.247

Overall, the two-factor model achieves the best fit relative to the initial three-factor model. Each factor expresses distinguishability from the other factor, and each factor reflects significant factor loadings above 0.50, as illustrated in Table 4-13. Testing of both the two-factor and three-factor models reveals the persistent imperfections associated with the Material Values Scale. The two measurement models collectively illustrate similar scale behavior from Griffin et al.'s (2004) materialism CFA using a French subsample, where the centrality dimension receives little validation due to poor performance, and Wong et al.'s (2003) materialism analysis using several East Asian subsamples, where the negatively worded items from each dimension load on a separate method factor.

In both the two-factor model and the respecified three-factor model, results show the positively worded items from all three materialism dimensions remain separate from

the negatively worded items. The negatively worded items either all load on a separate, uncorrelated construct or succumb to deletion from the model due to insignificant and poor loadings. An examination of both the summed dimension correlations, displayed in Table 4-14 and based only on the positively worded items of each dimension, and the inter-item correlations, displayed in Table 4-15, show moderate to high correlations among the positively worded items and low correlations between each item pair containing items of opposite wording valence.

Table 4-14

Materialism Dimension Sum Score Correlations (Positively Worded Items)

	Possession-Defined Success	**Acquisition Centrality**	**Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness**
Possession-Defined Success	—		
Acquisition Centrality	0.772**	—	
Acquisition as the Pursuit of Happiness	0.640**	0.594**	—

Table 4-15

Materialism Item Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations

	M	SD	S1	S2	S3 (R)	S4	S5	C1 (R)	C2 (R)	C3	C4	C5 (R)	H1 (R)	H2	H3 (R)	H4	H5
S1	4.37	1.77	—														
S2	3.99	1.92	.748**	—													
S3 (R)	2.93	1.57	.095**	.114**	—												
S4	4.47	1.68	.626**	.678**	.083**	—											
S5	4.05	1.97	.693**	.764**	.143**	.725**	—										
C1 (R)	2.73	1.38	-.069*	-.049	.406**	-.058	.014	—									
C2 (R)	3.50	1.68	-.156**	-.231**	.276**	-.148**	-.210**	.503**	—								
C3	4.91	1.45	.501**	.525**	.020	.532**	.550**	-.020**	-.062	—							
C4	4.22	1.81	.650**	.677**	.117**	.618**	.724**	.019	-.190**	.574**	—						
C5 (R)	3.09	1.53	-.111**	-.131**	.394**	-.102**	-.099*	.502**	.424**	-.072*	-.089**	—					
H1 (R)	2.68	1.43	-.087*	-.052	.317**	-.086**	-.087**	.408**	.331**	-.059	-.063*	.308**	—				
H2	4.60	1.67	.482**	.569**	-.008	.478**	.503**	-.039	-.180**	.439**	.463**	-.151**	.110**	—			
H3 (R)	3.30	1.64	-.080*	-.088**	.330**	-.073*	-.097**	.322**	.387**	-.047	-.074*	.344**	.400**	.043	—		
H4	4.56	1.74	.510**	.522**	.062*	.464**	.496**	-.034	-.067*	.466**	.471**	-.090**	.099**	.629**	.057	—	
H5	4.55	1.77	.487**	.492**	.029	.418**	.486**	-.072*	-.143**	.439**	.482**	-.162**	.092**	.571**	.008	.719**	—

*(*p<0.05, **p<0.01)*
Negatively worded items are denoted by (R).

The two-factor materialism structure also aligns more with liquid consumption in that one dimension focuses on acquiring tangible possessions and another dimension focuses on the lack of acquiring tangible possessions. As previously mentioned, one could argue that nomological validity exists more strongly for the positively worded items than the negatively worded items. Essentially, the positively worded factor expresses what materialism entails, while the negatively worded factor expresses what materialism does not entail.

Scoring highly on one factor may not necessarily predict one's scoring on the other factor, though the pattern may seem inverse to the intended structure of the Materialism Value Scale in its beginning. To ensure that respondents of the current research cluster by their scores on items that assess what materialism entails (as opposed to what materialism does not entail), the following analyses employ only the factor with the positively worded items across the three dimensions, labeled as *Materialism—Traditional* in Table 4-16. The table also contains loadings for the factor with negatively worded items, labeled as *Materialism—Alternative.*

Table 4-16

Two-Factor Materialism CFA Factor Loadings

Item	*Materialism—Traditional (Positively Worded)*	*Materialism—Alternative (Negatively Worded)*
I admire people who own expensive homes, cars and clothes.	0.812	
Some of the most important achievements in life include acquiring material possessions.	0.867	
The things I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life.	0.783	
I like to own things that impress people.	0.865	
Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure.	0.652	
I like a lot of luxury in my life.	0.797	
My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have.	0.645	
I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things.	0.649	
It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can't afford to buy all the things I'd like.	0.624	
I don't place much emphasis on the amount of material objects people own as a sign of success.		0.540
I try to keep my life simple, as far as possessions are concerned.		0.731
The things I own aren't all that important to me.		0.650
I put less emphasis on material things than most people I know.		0.661
I have all the things I really need to enjoy life.		0.552
I wouldn't be any happier if I owned nicer things.		0.546

After deliberation of the theoretical nature and quantitative scale behavior of materialism, the current research proposes that a sum score of the positively worded items across dimensions best reflects materialism. First, though happiness appears to load

well by itself apart from the success and centrality items in the respecified three-factor model, theoretical backing for the dimensions argues for their conjoining in that the items remain highly interrelated. Additionally, materialism acts as a grouping variable to divide the sample by high and low materialism levels rather than as a higher-order latent construct in the proposed structural model. As such, the analysis requires materialism in the form of a sum score by which to divide the sample. Further, employing only the positively worded items aligns closely with the nine-item materialism scale used to measure materialism at a general level as opposed to a domain level (Richins, 2004).

After solidifying the factor structure for materialism, the data within the total sample were divided by quartiles on the *Materialism—Traditional* factor and recoded to achieve groups of high and low materialism. The quartile with the lowest materialism scores comprises 241 respondents, and the quartile with the highest materialism scores comprises 247 respondents. The high materialism sample characteristics, illustrated in Table 4-17, include male, female and another gender (63.56 %, 36.03% and 0.40%, respectively), as well as a mean age of 38.64 years. The low materialism sample characteristics include both male and female (29.04% and 70.95%, respectively), as well as a mean age of 55.67 years. In addition to gender and age, the groups also differ on education achievement levels, with more than 35% of high materialists holding at least a master's degree compared to almost 18% of low materialists holding at least a master's degree.

Table 4-17

Multi-Group Analysis Sample Characteristics

Characteristic	High Materialism (n=247)		Low Materialism (n=241)	
	Frequency	**Percentage**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Gender				
Male	157	63.56%	70	29.04%
Female	89	36.03%	171	70.95%
Other	1	0.40%	—	—
Age				
18 - 24	33	13.36%	10	4.14%
25 - 34	78	31.57%	19	7.88%
35 - 44	70	28.34%	21	8.71%
45 - 54	31	12.55%	40	16.59%
55 - 64	20	8.09%	68	28.21%
65+	15	6.07%	83	34.43%
Education				
Some High School	3	1.21%	2	0.82%
High School/Equivalent	44	17.81%	39	16.18%
Some College	17	6.88%	43	17.84%
Associate's Degree	23	9.31%	31	12.86%
Bachelor's Degree	72	29.14%	83	34.43%
Master's Degree	80	32.38%	39	16.18%
Doctorate Degree	8	3.23%	4	1.65%
Annual Household Income				
Less than $20,000	24	9.71%	34	14.10%
$20,000 to $34,999	17	6.88%	21	8.71%
$35,000 to $49,999	17	6.88%	21	8.71%
$50,000 to $74,999	45	18.21%	62	25.72%
$75,000 to $99,999	48	19.43%	39	16.18%
$100,000 to $149,999	55	22.26%	38	15.76%
$150,000 or more	41	16.59%	26	10.78%
Instagram Daily Average Usage				
Fewer than 10 minutes	20	8.09%	80	33.19%
10 - 30 minutes	52	21.05%	79	32.78%
31 - 60 minutes	65	26.31%	34	14.10%
1 - 2 hours	45	18.21%	30	12.44%
2 - 3 hours	31	12.55%	11	4.56%
More than 3 hours	34	13.76%	7	2.90%
Instagram Posting Frequency				
Less than once a month	15	6.07%	100	41.49%
One to three times a month	18	7.28%	73	30.29%
Once a week	22	8.90%	24	9.95%
Several times a week	26	10.52%	27	11.20%
Once a day	42	17.00%	8	3.31%
Several times a day	54	21.86%	8	3.31%
All the time	70	28.34%	1	0.41%

Table 4-17 (continued)

Characteristic	High Materialism (n=247)		Low Materialism (n=241)	
	Frequency	**Percentage**	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Instagram Post Content Types				
Posts Photos of Experiential Purchases	215	87.04%	118	48.96%
Posts Photos of Material Purchases	182	73.68%	21	8.71%
Top Reason for Taking Photos of Experiential Purchases				
To Keep for Personal Memories	114	53.02%	92	77.96%
To Post on Social Media	48	22.32%	21	17.79%
Different Reason/No Reason	53	24.65%	5	2.07%
Top Reason for Taking Photos of Material Purchases				
To Keep for Personal Memories	82	45.05%	9	42.85%
To Post on Social Media	46	25.27%	6	28.57%
Different Reason/No Reason	54	29.67%	6	28.57%

Multi-Group Analysis: Confirmatory Factor Analysis

After identifying and recoding observations into high and low materialism groups, the author conducted a multisample confirmatory factor analysis. The objective of multisample confirmatory factor analysis lies in achieving measurement invariance to confirm equivalence between groups. Measurement invariance implies a high degree of similarity in the interpretation of and response to measures across two or more respondent groups (Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1998). Measurement invariance carries great importance in the comparison of groups. When different groups interpret and respond to measures in similar ways, findings and conclusions from group comparisons (including comparisons across model structures, between-construct relationships and latent factor scores) bear greater fortification (Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1998). Measures interpreted differently across groups, thus giving rise to varying meanings of the same latent construct, lead to unfair comparisons with results of little meaning.

While researchers often assess measurement invariance in cross-cultural studies, the current research aimed to address measurement invariance in the event that high and low materialists differ in the way they interpret topics of consumption. The hypotheses of

the current research focus on comparing the structural paths between latent constructs, such that one would test whether the direction and loading of a specific path in one group differed significantly from another group. Therefore, the author aimed to achieve full configural and full metric invariance before testing the multi-group structural model. With respect to the additional post-hoc examination of latent factor means, the researcher also aimed to achieve full structural invariance.

To test for configural invariance, a first-round CFA tested a structurally free model that allowed each parameter to express a unique loading across groups, illustrated in Figures 4.4a and 4.4b. The CFI of 0.918 and RMSEA of 0.059 indicate a moderate fit relative to the sample size and number of variables in the model (Hair et al., 2019). Construct reliabilities, displayed in Table 4-18, exceed 0.90, and the AVE for each construct exceeds 0.50, indicating convergent validity. For the high materialism group, squared correlations, displayed in Table 4-19, failed to exceed the AVE, leaving a void of discriminant validity for several constructs. For the low materialism group, squared correlations remain lower than the AVE for each construct to achieve discriminant validity, with the anticipated exception of parasocial relationship strength and self-human brand connection (0.71). Fit for the unconstrained model, though not excellent, reaches an acceptable level to conclude equivalence between groups.

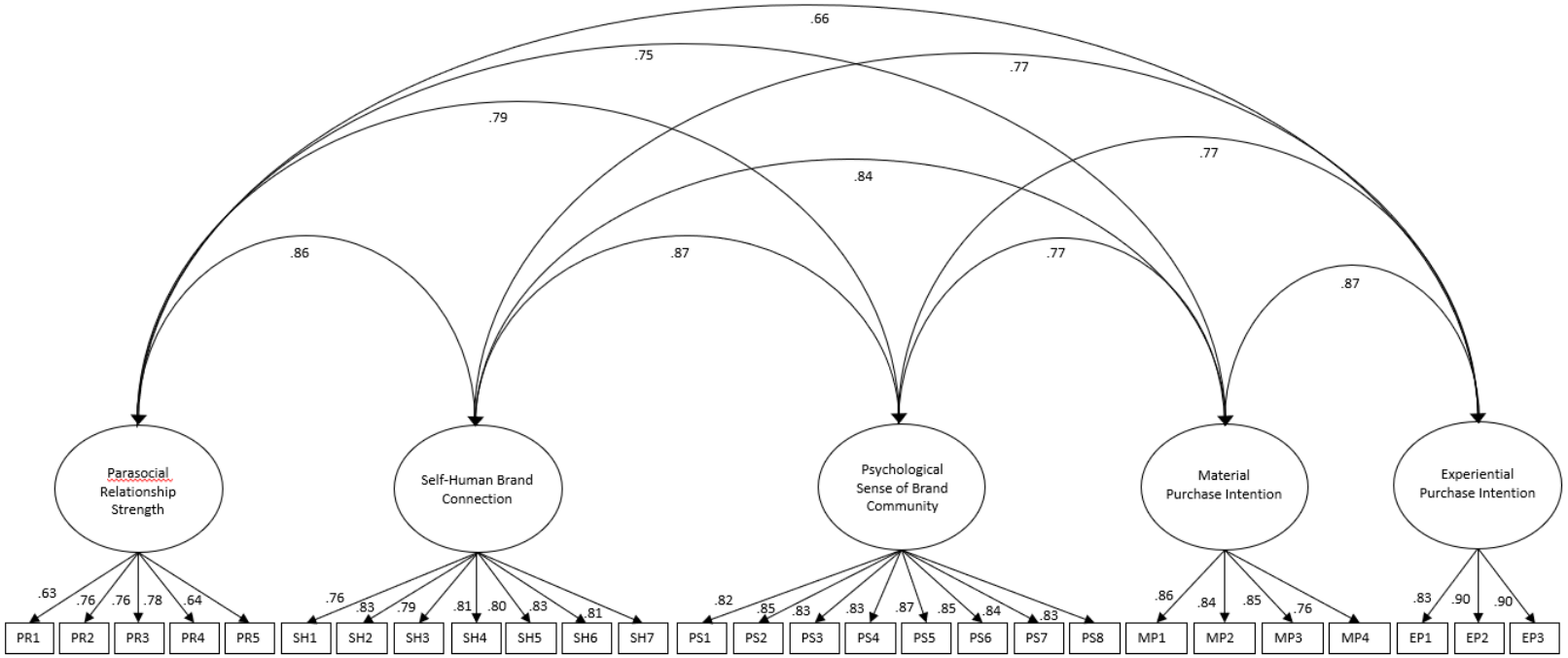

Figure 4-4a Multi-Group CFA Measurement Model (High Materialism)

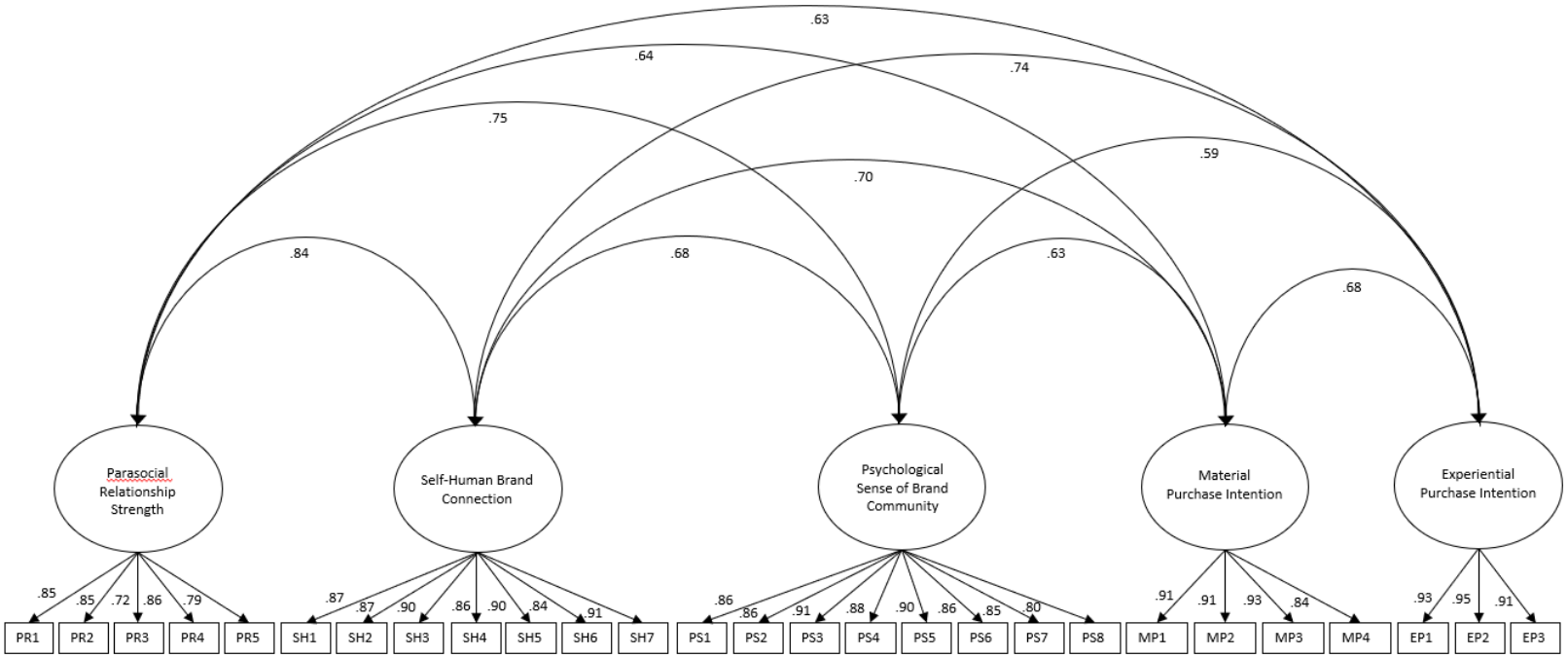

Figure 4-4b Multi-Group CFA Measurement Model (Low Materialism)

Table 4-18

Multi-Group Measurement Model Validity Statistics

Construct	High Materialism (n=247)		Low Materialism (n=241)	
	Construct Reliability	Average Variance Extracted	Construct Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
Parasocial Relationship Strength	0.840	0.514	0.907	0.663
Self-Human Brand Connection	0.928	0.648	0.959	0.772
Psychological Sense of Brand Community	0.950	0.705	0.959	0.749
Material Purchase Intention	0.897	0.686	0.941	0.801
Experiential Purchase Intention	0.907	0.765	0.949	0.861

Table 4-19

Multi-Group Measurement Model Squared Correlations

Correlated Constructs	High Materialism (n=247)		Low Materialism (n=241)	
	Squared Correlation	Discriminant Validity	Squared Correlation	Discriminant Validity
Parasocial Relationship Strength <--> Self-Human Brand Connection	0.737	No	0.710	No
Parasocial Relationship Strength <--> Material Purchase Intention	0.567	No	0.413	Yes
Experiential Purchase Intention <--> Parasocial Relationship Strength	0.435	Yes	0.394	Yes
Parasocial Relationship Strength <--> Psychological Sense of Brand Community	0.622	No	0.562	Yes
Self-Human Brand Connection <--> Material Purchase Intention	0.708	No	0.491	Yes
Experiential Purchase Intention <--> Self-Human Brand Connection	0.586	Yes	0.553	Yes
Self-Human Brand Connection <--> Psychological Sense of Brand Community	0.755	No	0.459	Yes
Experiential Purchase Intention <--> Material Purchase Intention	0.758	No	0.467	Yes
Psychological Sense of Brand Community <--> Material Purchase Intention	0.599	Yes	0.399	Yes
Experiential Purchase Intention <--> Psychological Sense of Brand Community	0.591	Yes	0.351	Yes

To test for metric invariance, a second-round CFA tested the model with factor loadings constrained as equal across groups. Upon comparing the configural invariance model and the metric invariance model fit indices, a significant chi-square difference of 40.49 indicates inequivalence between the two models. However, due to a combined sample size of 488 respondents, small changes in the chi-square statistic may conclude significance for minimal differences (Milfont & Fischer, 2010). One could examine changes between other fit indices to further support conclusions. Upon examining the CFI for each model, one finds that the difference fails to exceed 0.01, yielding support for the constrained model (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). Given the small differences for each fit index in M2, one could argue that full metric invariance exists.

To test for scalar invariance, a third-round CFA involved the constraining of the factor loadings and y-intercepts to be equal across groups. Upon comparing the metric invariance model and the scalar invariance model fit indices, a significant chi-square difference of 342.71 indicates inequivalence between the two models. The author proceeded to forfeit scalar invariance rather than remove items from the model in an effort to achieve partial structural invariance. Table 4-20 reflects the fit measures in each round of invariance testing.

Table 4-20

Model Fit Comparisons for Multi-Group Measurement Invariance

Model Invariance	X^2, df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	Δ X^2, df	p	Δ CFI	Δ TLI	Δ RMSEA
M1 (Configural)	1,704.78, 628	0.918	0.908	0.059	—	—	—	—	—
M2 (Metric)	1,745.27, 650	0.917	0.910	0.059	40.49, 22	$p < 0.01$	0.001	0.002	0.000
M3 (Scalar)	2,087.98, 677	0.893	0.889	0.065	342.71, 27	$p < 0.01$	0.024	0.021	0.006

Multi-Group Analysis: Structural Model Specification

After achieving full configural invariance and full metric invariance, the measurement model underwent respecification to reflect the proposed theoretical relationships in the structural model shown in Figures 4.5a and 4.5b. The author first assessed fit for the unconstrained structural model, allowing for uniquity in each parameter estimate across groups. A significant chi-square statistic of 1,815.74 ($p < 0.05$) with 632 degrees of freedom, the CFI of 0.910 and the RMSEA of 0.062 reveal a moderate model fit. The author then conducted a chi-square difference test for significant changes in proposed theoretical relationships between the high materialism group and the low materialism group by constraining the structural parameter estimates to be equal across groups. A chi-square difference of 27.166 ($p < 0.01$) with a difference of 8 degrees of freedom, illustrated in Table 4-21, reveals only a slight worsening in model fit after adding constraints. Minimal shifts in other fit indices, such as a CFI difference of 0.002 and no difference in the RMSEA, suggest that the constrained model fit does not significantly worsen with the added constraints.

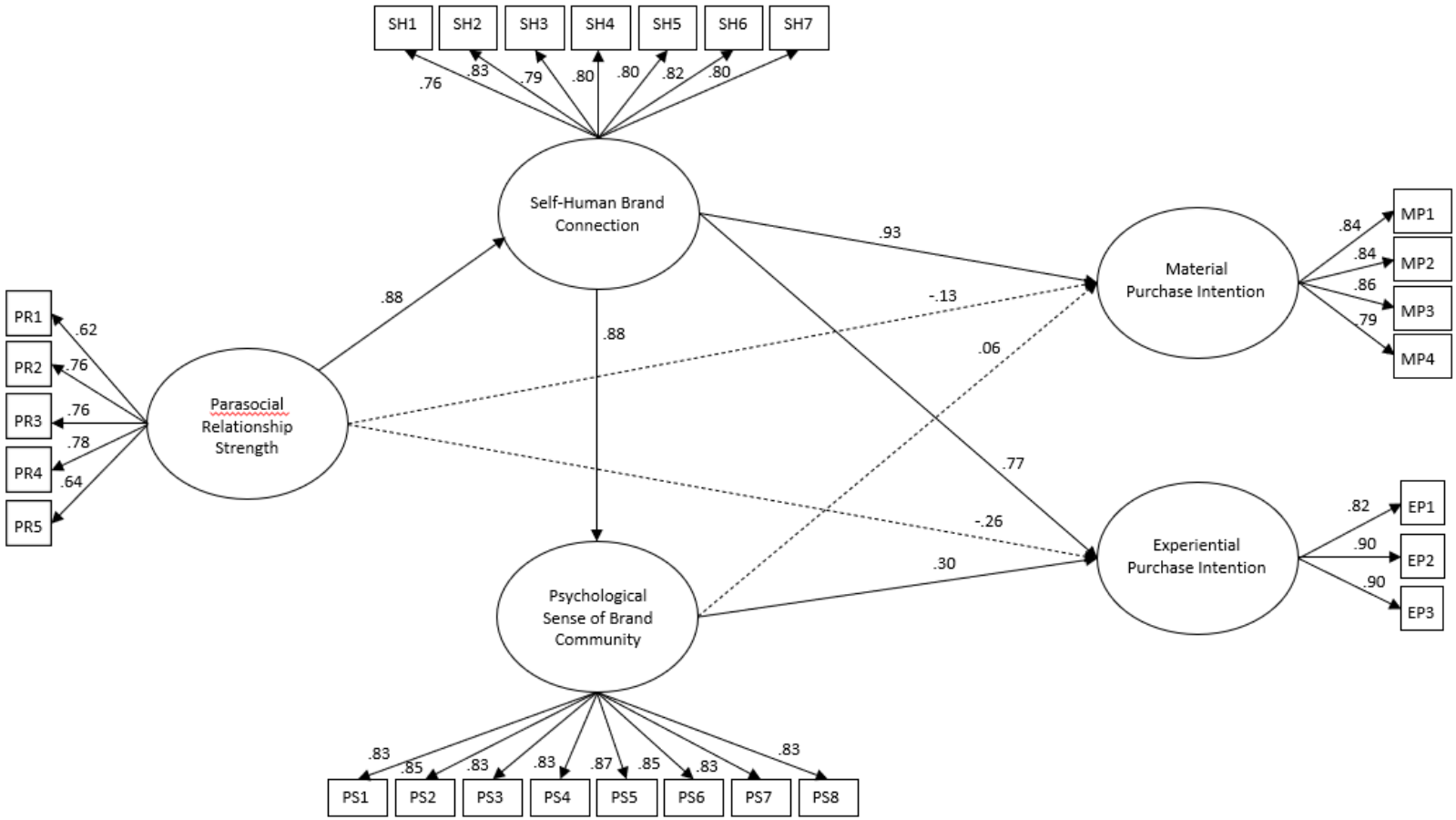

Figure 4-5a Multi-Group Unconstrained Structural Model (High Materialism)

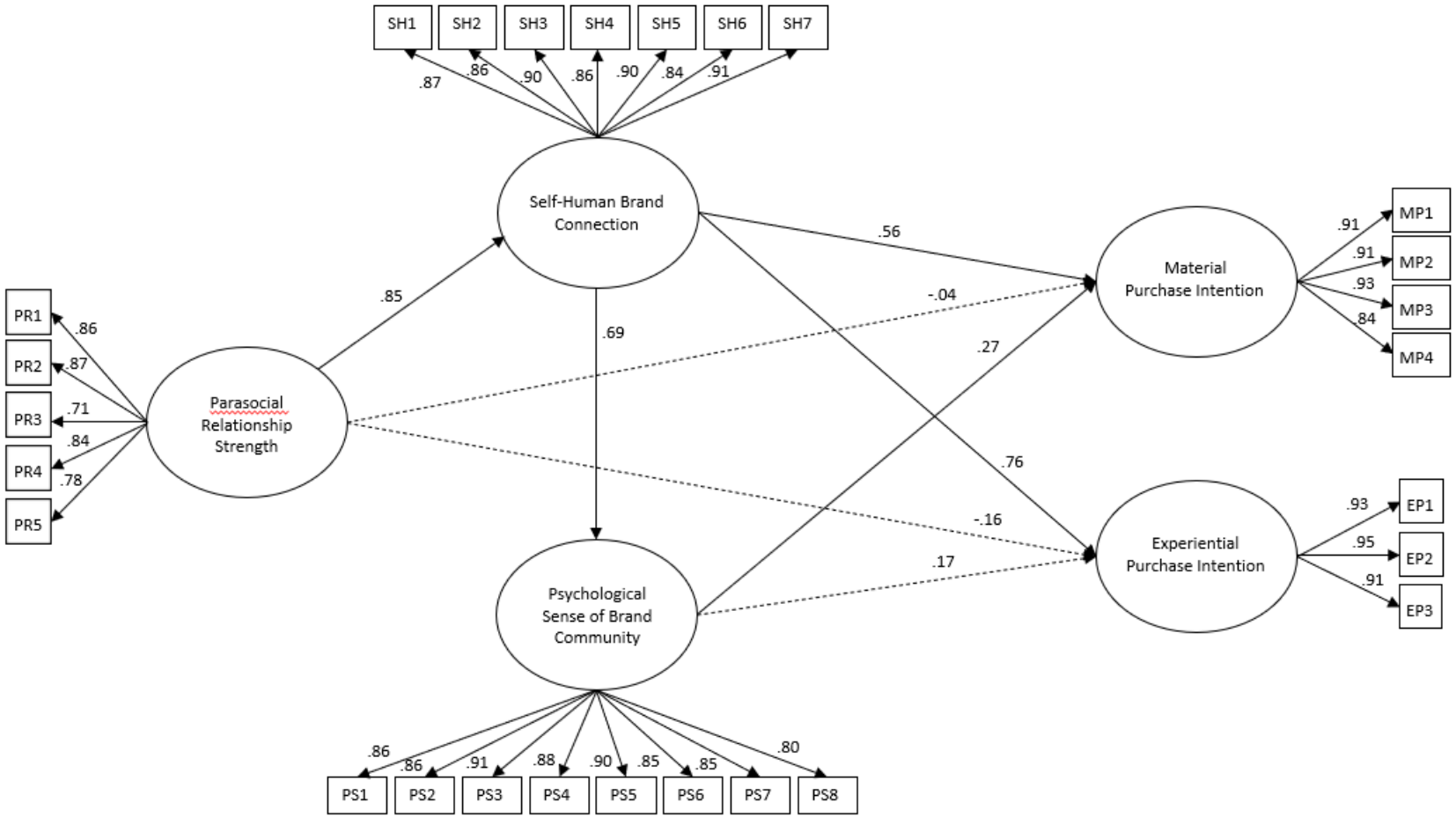

Figure 4-5b Multi-Group Unconstrained Structural Model (Low Materialism)

Table 4-21

Multi-Group Structural Model Fit Comparisons

Measures of Fit	Unconstrained Model	Constrained Parameter Model	Δ Fit
X^2 Goodness-of-Fit	1,815.74	1,842.90	27.166 (p< 0.01)
Degrees of Freedom	632	640	8
CFI	0.910	0.908	0.002
NFI	0.869	0.867	0.002
TLI	0.900	0.900	0.00
RMSEA	0.062	0.062	0.00

Overall, the chi-square difference test indicates no difference between the high materialism group and the low materialism group for the proposed theoretical relationships. Alternatively, model comparison results showing a significant worsening in fit would have called for a closer look at the individual paths to pinpoint the differences in structural relationships between the two groups. By constraining a path to be equal across groups, one would examine the change in model fit between the freely estimated structural model and the structural model constrained on a single path. Should model fit significantly worsen when constraining a given path, the change in fit would indicate a significant difference in path loading between the groups. Given the multi-group analyses with the structural models, H6 and H7, synopsized in Table 4-22, are not supported.

Table 4-22

Multi-Group Analysis Conclusions

Hypothesis	Tested Relationship	Result
H6	Parasocial Relationship Strength, Self-Human Brand Connection, Psychological Sense of Brand Community -> Material Purchase Intention	Not Supported
H7	Parasocial Relationship Strength, Self-Human Brand Connection, Psychological Sense of Brand Community -> Experiential Purchase Intention	Not Supported

Conclusion

Chapter 4 included the statistical analyses and results pertinent to testing H1-H7 in the current research. A quantitative pilot study tested the survey flow and measures to gauge potential issues that could increase systematic bias during data collection. An exploratory factor analysis uncovered the presence of scale validity, an unexpected two-factor structure for the materialism construct and a need for survey question repositioning to alleviate possible common method bias. After survey adjustments, a main data collection round garnered 995 observations against which proposed theoretical models were compared. Tests of fit on the proposed structural model with the total sample suggested significant, notable findings to support the positive effects of parasocial relationship strength on self-human brand connection and of self-human brand connection on psychological sense of brand community. Further, significant findings supported self-human brand connection's positive influence on a follower's purchase intention of both a material good and a life experience featured by an influencer. Evidence also provided moderate support for the positive influence of a psychological sense of brand community on material and experiential purchase intention. Three proposed relationships, including the positive effect of parasocial relationship strength on material and experiential purchase intentions and the positive effect of psychological sense of brand community on experiential purchase intention, remained unsupported.

Next, a measurement model confirmed a two-factor structure for materialism before the construct's positively worded items, all loading on the same factor and collectively exuding a traditional understanding of materialism, combined to form the sum score used to quarter the total sample into groups. A subsequent multi-group

analysis, including a group with the highest materialism scores and a group with the lowest materialism scores, tested fit for structural models of varying constraint levels. Results revealed that both groups shared similarities on all relationships formerly predicted to differ across respondents with high and low materialism levels. Therefore, the last several proposed relationships, including the positive, individual effects of parasocial relationship strength, self-human brand connection and psychological sense of brand community on the outcomes of material and experiential purchase intentions, encompassed in H6 and H7 remained unsupported.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The current research examined the role of relational aspects among social media influencers and followers, subsequent consumption behaviors and the degree to which high and low materialists differ in the presence and strength of the proposed relationships. A mixed methods approach began with qualitative interviews that explored Instagram users' thoughts and feelings on influencers they followed, along with their influencer-inspired material and experiential purchases. After qualitative results confirmed the existence of the latent constructs under study, a quantitative cross-sectional study measured each latent construct, along with Instagram usage habits, to test several proposed relationships among parasocial relationship strength, self-human brand connection, psychological sense of brand community, material and experiential purchase intention, and materialism. The following chapter discusses the findings, details limitations in both studies and maps out paths for the future exploration of materialism and social media influencers in the marketing of products and experiences.

Discussion

Liquid consumption underlies the current research as a vital force that enlivens the effects of personal and communal connections in digitality on consumption behavior. The proposed model surrounds the notion that an increasingly prevalent liquid.

consumption now rises to operate alongside solid consumption, a move from stability, security and physicality to accessibility, fluidity and dematerialization (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). Consumers now favor efficiency in such a way that renting and sharing take preference over owning if the former achieve greater efficiency (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2017). The shift in consumption style leads one to inquire about the inevitable shift in how consumers meet particular needs and maintain self-identities. Bardhi and Eckhardt (2017), in conjunction with Bauman's (2000) original theory, propose that liquid consumption can take various forms and differ among consumers with respect to self-relevance. Though liquid consumption infiltrates all consumer lifestyles, the ways in which an individual consumer adjusts his or her behavior in light of liquidity remains unexplored.

Materialism stands as one personal value that theoretically conflicts with liquid consumption, as the security and certainty high materialists find in the acquisition of physical possessions transfers to an intangible form. The current research chose materialism as a moderating consumer personal value to examine the ways in which high materialists would meet needs in increased liquidity or, specifically, in the context of social media. To contribute to liquid consumption's theoretical progression in the marketing literature, the current research asked two research questions and proposed several hypotheses to examine liquidity in the context of materialism and influencer marketing.

The first research question asked, *how are high materialists meeting their needs in the digital realm as liquid consumption increases?* The current research aimed to provide an answer by examining the differences in consumer perceptions of social media

influencers and other followers of the same influencer. Further, the current research examined the differences among respondents regarding their intentions to purchase both material products and life experiences featured by an influencer. After establishing the presence of the relationships in the proposed model among the total sample, the current research compared consumers by materialism level to study the differences in respondent groups with respect to the proposed relationships.

The author introduced parasocial relationship strength, self-human brand connection and psychological sense of brand community as predictors of two purchase intention outcomes. Consumers who engage in strong parasocial relationships remain more likely to view media personalities as part of their own identification groups (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Consumers can also reach self-identity goals by engaging in parasocial relationships with others of fame (Escalas & Bettman, 2017). Detecting feelings of friendship with personalities, ranging from film stars to book characters, was predicted to lead to connecting with personalities based on similarity and identification. Additionally, self-identification with an influencer was predicted to positively affect the sense of community among influencer followers, regarded in the current research as a community surrounding an influencer's human brand. Online communities of human brands remain evident in the Twitter interactions of well-known college football players, and followers of Instagram influencers were suspected to report feeling a similar sense of brand community (Yukel & Labrecque, 2016). To examine the interrelationships among the three relational and communal constructs, the proposed structural model tested the following relationships:

H1: The strength of a parasocial relationship between a follower and an influencer will positively affect the strength of a follower's self-human brand connection with the influencer.

H2: The strength of a follower's self-human brand connection with an influencer will positively affect the strength of a follower's psychological sense of brand community, specifically within an influencer's human brand community.

The results support the proposed relationships for H1 and H2, showing that a strong parasocial relationship between a follower and an influencer increases the likelihood that a follower will also perceive a connection with the influencer as a human brand. Moreover, when a follower perceives a self-human brand connection, he or she also likely perceives a psychological sense of brand community among other followers.

The second research question asked, *how do relationships and communities on social media influence the purchase intentions of high materialists?* High materialists indulge in the acquisition of physical products. However, Bardhi and Eckhardt (2012) assert that in the spirit of liquid consumption, consumers exhibit a rise in preference for experiences over products. While consumers used to employ products to communicate symbolic meaning, consumers can now communicate symbolic meaning by posting evidence of experiences on social media (Richins, 1994). Experiences help one in the task of self-definition; acquiring experiences to build self-identity was predicted to appeal to high materialists more than material products, especially in times where one can post evidence of the experience to social media platforms. Parasocial relationship strength, self-human brand connection and psychological sense of brand community were

predicted to increase the likelihood that a consumer would purchase a material product or life experience when first viewed in influencer content.

Parasocial relationship strength leads followers to see influencer product endorsements as highly credible, positively affecting the likelihood of purchase (Chapple & Cownie, 2017). A consumer engaged in a strong personal relationship aims to align his or her consumption, including both material and experiential purchases, with that of the media personality (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016; Burke, 2017). To examine the influence of parasocial relationship strength on consumption behavior, the proposed structural model tested the following relationship:

> *H3: The strength of a parasocial relationship between a follower and an influencer will positively affect a follower's purchase intention for both (a) material goods and (b) life experiences featured in the influencer's content.*

Findings fail to support the proposed relationships for H3a and H3b. In other words, as a perceived parasocial relationship between a follower and an influencer grows stronger, the likelihood of a follower purchasing a material product or a life experience featured by an influencer lessens. The multicollinearity suspicions in validity tests for parasocial relationship strength, as well as for self-human brand connection and psychological sense of brand community, offer one explanation regarding the reversal in loading signs. Multicollinearity can spur several different unusual occurrences, such as reversed directionality of relationships, and future analyses for the data include remedial techniques to reduce the influence of multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2019). Though conclusions regarding the proposed relationship could be regarded as largely undetermined, a possible explanation for the finding surrounds a follower's aversion to

forming parasocial relationships. The qualitative component of the current research uncovered negative reactions from a few respondents at the discussion of experiencing a parasocial relationship with an influencer. While personality traits or values may lead to an aversion to parasocial relationships, social desirability bias may also play a role in such aversion, as self-conscious respondents may align parasocial relationships with negative implications.

In addition to parasocial relationship strength, self-human brand connection was predicted to influence a follower's material and experiential purchase intentions. Consumers who identify with endorsers express greater likelihood to purchase the endorsed products, and an influencer's degree of relatability boosts a consumer's likelihood to switch to the recommended product brand (Carlson & Donavan, 2017; Gulamali & Persson, 2017). To examine the influence of self-human brand connection on consumption behavior, the proposed structural model tested the following relationship:

> *H4: The strength of a follower's self-human brand connection with an influencer will positively affect a follower's purchase intention for both (a) material goods and (b) life experiences featured in the influencer's content.*

Results strongly support H4a and H4b, suggesting that as a follower's perception of a self-human brand connection strengthens, a follower's intention to purchase a material product or life experience featured by the influencer increases.

The author evaluated psychological sense of brand community as the third predictor of consumption behavior. Others whom a consumer perceives as similar to him or her receive a sense of high credibility and influence the consumer's purchase intentions (Prendergast et al., 2010). Psychological sense of brand community, taking

presence in object brand communities, was predicted to also take presence in communities surrounding human brands, specifically within the human brand community of a social media influencer, and further encourage the follower to purchase a featured material product or life experience. To examine the influence of psychological sense of brand community on consumption behavior, the proposed structural model tested the following relationship:

> *H5: The strength of a follower's psychological sense of brand community, specifically within an influencer's human brand community, will positively affect a follower's purchase intention for both (a) material goods and (b) life experiences featured in the influencer's content.*

Results support H5a but not H5b. In other words, as a follower perceives a stronger sense of community with other followers of an influencer, he or she expresses a stronger intention to purchase a material product featured by the influencer. Perceived communal bonds with other followers strengthen a follower's purchase intention for life experiences that an influencer features, but not enough to suggest a high likelihood of such a relationship.

Finally, the current research predicted that the proposed relationships in the first five hypotheses would differ among consumers of varying materialism levels, with stronger relationships occurring for high materialists. High materialists remain most likely to purchase material products to fulfill needs (Rindfleisch et al., 2009; Richins, 2017). However, the happiness received from acquiring life experiences remains similar among consumers regardless of materialism level (Millar & Thomas, 2009). Consumers looking to expand their experiential CVs by engaging in notable activities may include

high materialists aiming to imitate the perceivably successful influencers they follow (Keinan & Kivetz, 2010). To examine the distinctions between high and low materialists regarding their perceptions of social media influencers and consumption intentions, the proposed structural model tested the following differences:

H6: Materialism will moderate the relationships between (a) parasocial relationship, (b) self-human brand connection and (c) psychological sense of brand community and material purchase intention, such that the relationships will be stronger for followers who are high materialists.

H7: Materialism will moderate the relationships between (a) parasocial relationship, (b) self-human brand connection and (c) psychological sense of brand community and experiential purchase intention, such that the relationships will be stronger for followers who are high materialists.

An examination of differences between the two groups suggests that the proposed relationships in the model vary only to a small degree with respect to a follower's level of materialism, therefore failing to support H6a-H6c and H7a-H7c. In other words, parasocial relationship, self-human brand connection and psychological sense of brand community affect a high materialist's material and experiential purchase intentions to the same extent as a low materialist's material and experiential purchase intentions. While the similarities imply failed support for the model's predictive validity, the similarities also suggest that relational and communal phenomena and a high degree of materialism can exist in the same space. In other words, the elements low materialists perceive—the connections with an influencer, the sense of community among followers and the lure of experiences—can be perceived to a similar degree by high materialists. Liquidity

arguably introduces an area where materialism and other values traditionally opposed to materialism begin to parallel. In some ways, liquidity reestablishes the manifestation of concepts such as commitment, togetherness and acquisition. As liquidity increasingly pervades every facet of consumption, consumers employing the value of materialism to achieve consumption goals will perhaps adhere to the reestablishments, engaging in the relational and intangible aspects of a digital world.

Theoretical Contributions

The current research offers four overarching theoretical contributions. The first theoretical contribution involves an expansion of liquid consumption application to social media in an influencer marketing context. Previous conceptual and qualitative liquid consumption studies focus on topics such as world traveling and the sharing economy (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Eckhardt et al. 2019). Eckhardt and Bardhi (2019) delve into conceptual specifics of consumer social media use to highlight the need for further study on one's abilities to build and maintain different identities on social media as well as gain attention through social media to exude success and influencer status. The current research infused liquid consumption in a social media influencer context to qualitatively and quantitatively examine the way in which relational constructs influence consumption.

The second theoretical contribution involves the unveiling of an alternative view of materialism in liquid consumption. The multi-group analysis results, though unsupportive of hypothesized relationships, still reveal a glimpse at the ways in which high materialists react in a liquid consumption context on social media. Essentially, the perceived bonds with influencers and other followers positively influence consumption outcomes, even for high materialists. The findings present a different lens through which

to view materialistic consumption, or a boundary condition, as the findings extend previous materialism research involving materialists and community values, materialists and relationships, materialists and self-verification, and materialists and experiences (Belk, 1985; Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Pieters, 2013). The third theoretical contribution involves the positioning of influencers as human brands with online brand communities of followers. Results of the current research reveal that followers identify with influencers and recognize the connections among the products influencers post, activities influencers do and the branded narratives influencers maintain. The identification with such influencers spurs followers to perceive a stronger psychological sense of community surrounding the influencer's brand and encourages purchase intentions for material products that influencers feature.

The final theoretical contribution entails a framework proposition to help establish future measures for consumer perceptions of influencers. Social media tends to challenge the meaning of influencer, bestowing the title on any Instagram user with growing popularity. The widespread use of the term *influencer*, as a result, leaves the definition murky. The influencer classification framework clears the murkiness by positioning both macro and micro influencers of different paths to fame as social media influencers, with the potential achievement of opinion leadership surrounding all influencer types.

Managerial Contributions

The current research provides three overarching managerial contributions that demonstrate the effectiveness of relationships and experiences in influencer marketing. The first managerial contribution involves followers' alignment of self-identity with influencers as human brands. Just as consumers connect with object brands to verify or

enhance their identities, followers connect with human brands to do the same (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). The qualitative results show several ways in which followers connect with influencers based on similarities, a pattern further supported by the quantitative results. The aligning of self-identities among followers and influencers provides managerial advantages under the premise of permission marketing (Godin, 1999). For instance, a follower base equates to a group of consumers who presumably share some commonalities and who voluntarily allow a social media platform to display content from certain influencers. Follower clusters help to create a follower profile for a specific influencer, allowing marketers to better understand the likelihood of success for particular products and experiences the influencer endorses.

The second managerial contribution highlights the way online human brand communities influence followers. A psychological sense of brand community may be beneficial for brands despite a lack of short-term tangible evidence acquirable by firms. Followers who perceive strong ties with friends on Instagram are more likely to report higher brand community identification and membership intention if they frequently participate in brand-related matters, such as looking at brand profiles or consuming content (Phua et al., 2017). Though less prosocial followers may not take as many quantifiable actions (such as "likes," shares or clicks) for firms to observe, Syrdal and Briggs (2018) argue that a lack of measurable behavior does not always mean a lack of deep engagement with content. For instance, a follower may read information about a topic of interest and engage in a period of deep thought about the content; however, a firm would have no way of receiving feedback about the powerful impact of the content should the follower refrain from commenting, "liking," sharing or expressing

acknowledgment in other ways (Syrdal & Briggs, 2018). Conversely, some followers may share a piece of content without actually reading or watching most of it, lessening the content's influence on the follower (Syrdal & Briggs 2018). Overall, firms should not automatically undermine the value of psychological brand communities simply by their possible failure to produce empirical social media metrics. Psychological sense of brand community among followers may stand as an early part of the decision-making process that grooms followers for later purchases.

The third managerial contribution involves the illustration of experiential consumption intentions and a desire to document and showcase the experiences with others, evidenced by the amount of respondents who are driven to take pictures for the main purpose of posting to social media. A rise in liquid consumption, along with the archival nature of social media, presents opportunities for high materialists to engage in more experiential consumption. Marketers for material products can add value by integrating more experiential elements to appeal to high materialists as they move to the use of both the tangible and intangible to maintain self-identities. The issue of growing liquidity and experiential preferences remains important to managers, for all consumers of the future will have to find comfort in digital goods they seemingly own but cannot touch and in experiences in which they involve themselves but do not own.

Limitations

Several limitations presented themselves in the current research. First, sampling demographics in both the qualitative and quantitative studies arguably denigrate the generalization of findings. The qualitative research study gathered accounts from eleven undergraduate students majoring in business at a single university. The students, ranging

in age from 20 to 22 years, all belonged to the same generation, inevitably aligning the students in their experiences and perceptions of social media and consumption. Though the presence of parasocial phenomena, psychological sense of brand community and other latent constructs prevalently appeared in the students' accounts, the presence of such latent constructs may vary in degree among members of other generations who view social media and consumption through lenses of a different shade.

Sampling demographics in the quantitative full study pose a caveat as well. Among the two groups of high and low materialists, materialism seems to decrease as age increases. For instance, the low materialist group exhibits a mean age of 55.67 years compared to a mean age of 38.64 years in the high materialism group. The male-to-female ratio of each group remains almost perfectly inverse to the other, with males composing almost 64 percent of the high materialists and females composing almost 71 percent of low materialists. Instagram usage and posting frequencies differ as well, with one third of low materialists spending fewer than 10 minutes per day on the platform and posting less than once per month. High materialists report significantly higher frequencies of Instagram usage and posting. The demographic differences and Instagram habits between the two materialism groups leaves an unsettled gap in the variance explained by materialism within the study.

A second limitation area of the study surrounded a given respondent's perception of a life experience featured by an influencer. The way different consumers interpret the image of a single Instagram post may moderate the effects of relational constructs on outcomes in the model. Some consumers may perceive material aspects of a posted image, while others perceive the experiential aspects. For instance, an influencer took an

image in a desert posing among camels. While the picturesque scene bore its own amazement, multiple followers within the comments section begged to know where the influencer purchased her accoutrements. In the same way, some respondents may interpret a taproom visit as an experience, while other respondents may fail to consider the unique value of the taproom environment and focus on the beer pint as a material purchase.

The study design could have been changed to account for such interpretive variations. In its aim to generalize, the study of the current research perhaps sacrificed a few important controls. As a primary alternative, one could conduct a controlled experiment using a set of posts from a single influencer. All manipulations could be carried out by making adjustments to the experimental materials. While the experiment would offer the most control, the experiment would perhaps do so at the highest cost of generalizability. The influencer used would only offer one experience or topic of interest for participants to assess. Participants may find that they would not actually follow the influencer on Instagram. Additionally, constructs such as parasocial relationships need a period of time to develop, in some instances. Even if additional posts were included with the target post for the participants to learn about the influencer and gain a sense of his or her identity, the participants would likely fail to experience parasocial phenomena to a power level needed to initiate effects.

A secondary alternative involves conducting a study within the realm of Instagram to maintain a certain degree of control while gaining more generalizability through use of a field setting. A researcher could choose a number of real Instagram influencers according to the particular moderating factors being examined, only gather

data from their followers by survey and conduct a multi-group analysis. To generalize across contexts, one could conduct a second study using other real Instagram influencers aligning with the between- and within-group similarities and differences of the first study. While a researcher would be able to reach a compromise of control and reality, the context in which the data would be gathered would not necessarily represent the entire population of Instagram users. Future studies could examine influencers and followers in the formerly proposed spaces to control for possible variance sources in the current research.

Third, a possible shift in the boundary encompassing materialism combined with the questionable validity of the Material Values Scale stood as a notable limitation. The emergence of a less-than-perfect factor structure for the Material Values Scale, which included a suspected artifactual factor solely containing negatively worded items, posed as another example of the scale's sporadic performance levels noted in previous marketing literature. At the scale's failure to similarly converge on the proper dimensions across cultures, Wong et al. (2003) attribute the scale performance to cultural value differences. In another instance in which the scale dimensions fail to converge as theoretically intended across cultures, Griffin et al. (2004) mention that the results show not only poor scale performance but also the possible fluid existence of the materialism concept. Does the manifestation of materialism change depending on the other dominant personal values in an individual's personal value system? Is materialism too elusive to contain within three dimensions, especially when liquid consumption may mask or shift the expression of one's materialism? An expanse of territory appears to remain uncharted

and ripe for future research in the conceptualization and measurement of materialism as a personal value.

Finally, hindrances stemming from suspected multicollinearity and common method variance among the latent constructs led to an unsatisfactory examination of the proposed structural model. Due to the high interrelation among parasocial relationship strength, self-human brand connection and psychological sense of brand community, future research attempts may include the use of a higher-order factor to represent all three constructs and the use of further common method variance testing.

Future Research

The findings not only offer insight to the revisited research questions but also provide a clearer path to future research on social media's vast influence in consumption behavior. Space exists for the materialism and influencer research streams to extend their branches in several directions. First, the unexpected behavior of the Material Values Scale in the current research suggests a greater need for attention to the concept, measurement and evolution of materialism. As previously mentioned, the scale's performance quality greatly varies across contexts, and such instances call for a closer look at scale validation and the conceptualization of materialism.

Second, while high materialists appear to connect with human brands and experience a sense of community on Instagram, high materialists may also use Instagram for other aspects of need fulfillment, such as affirmation or security. As noted earlier in the current research, Instagram users who follow brands have expressed feeling a sense of belonging and have used the platform to actively engage with the brand (Phua et al., 2017). Along with previous literature, the findings of the current research suggest a look

at other ways users of varying levels of materialism achieve consumption goals on Instagram.

Third, one could study high materialists who embrace other values and habits of liquid consumption. The current research introduced a look at the ways in which high materialists engage in liquid consumption in a digital space. An increase in liquidity implies many other values, including minimalism and environmentalism, that can be examined in the context of consumption for high materialists. How do values like minimalism and environmentalism manifest themselves in the lives of high materialists? Anti-consumption campaigns by brands like Patagonia help to create a certain image with which consumers want to identify and embrace. How do high materialists interpret and use anti-consumption brands to build and maintain their self-identities? Does the prestige of owning goods seen as environmentally friendly or minimalist encourage high materialists to adopt values traditionally believed to be directly opposed to materialism?

The ever-changing realm of social media influencers also leaves space to study influencer marketing across an array of contexts. The qualitative component of the current research opened a pathway to further examine a follower's perceived locality of a particular influencer. One influencer followed by two qualitative respondents originates from an area close to where both respondents currently reside. Though the influencer posts pictures from locations around the globe and makes little mention of her origin, the two respondents following the influencer are aware of her roots and believe the influencer's origin plays a role in their identification with her. Exploring the effect of an

influencer's perceived locality could unveil influencer marketing synergies among family-owned businesses, budding influencers, and the power of homophily among an area's residents..

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APPENDIX A

QUALITATIVE SURVEY

Survey Questions

1. Describe a favorite social media influencer that you follow on Instagram, including the influencer's personality, the content he or she posts, and the number of followers he or she has.

2. Describe how you discovered the influencer and/or why you chose to follow him/her.

3. Describe your relationship with the influencer, such as the extent to which you feel like you know the influencer or interact with the influencer.

4. Describe the way(s) in which the influencer connects/forms relationships with other followers. How do you feel about the influencer in terms of the relationships he/she forms with followers?

5. Does the influencer feature a mix of products (such as jewelry, clothing or any other possessions) and life experiences (such as eating out, going to a concert, traveling and any other activity) in his or her content? If so, describe the mix of products and life experiences, including how the influencer uses the mix to communicate his or her self-identity.

6. Describe a specific instance in which you were inspired to purchase a product (including jewelry, clothing or any other possessions) that the influencer featured.

7. Describe a specific instance in which you were inspired to engage in a life experience (including eating out, going to a concert, traveling and any other activity) about which the influencer posted.

Follow-Up Survey Questions

1. What kind of content does the influencer produce and distribute (products vs. experiences; fitness, travel etc.)?

2. In what format is the content produced (images, graphics, videos etc.)?

3. What do you like most about the influencer as a person?

4. What do you like most about the influencer's content?

5. What words would you use to describe the influencer?

6. Do you feel as though you have come to know the influencer on a more personal level? Can you elaborate more on that?

7. If you do not feel that you are similar to the influencer, would you like to be more similar to him or her (aspiring to be/ideal self)?

8. Do you feel as though you belong to a “community” made up of other followers of the influencer?

9. Describe a specific instance in which an influencer directly communicated to you by either responding to a comment, direct messaging you etc.

10. Are the featured products usually in paid sponsorship or non-paid sponsorship posts?

11. Does a paid sponsorship change how you feel about the product in the post?

12. Do the influencer’s posts about brands make you interested to buy the brands specifically?

13. Do you feel the influencer only features a few certain brands?

14. Can you recall any brands the influencer features?

15. Can you recall any experiences the influencer has recently enjoyed?

16. Would you consider the influencer to be his or her own brand?

APPENDIX B

MEASUREMENT SCALES

Life Experience Purchase Intention (adapted from Hultman et al., 2015)
After seeing a life experience posted by [piped text for influencer name],
1. There is a high likelihood that I will participate in a similar life experience within the foreseeable future.
2. I usually intend to participate in a similar life experience within the foreseeable future.
3. I will usually participate in a similar life experience within the next 12 months after seeing the post.

Life Experience Participation Desire (adapted from Hornik & Diesendruck, 2017)
1. After seeing a life experience posted by [piped text for influencer name], how much do you usually desire to participate in a similar life experience?

Product Purchase Intention (Coyle & Thorson, 2001)
After seeing a product posted by [piped text for influencer name],
1. It is very likely that I will buy the product.
2. I will purchase the product next time I need it.
3. I will definitely try the product.
4. I will recommend the product to my friends.

Human-Brand Identification, (adapted from Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Carlson & Donavan, 2013)
1. Please indicate to what degree your self-image overlaps with the image of [piped text for influencer name].
2. Please indicate to what degree your self-image overlaps with the image of [piped text for influencer name].

Self-Brand Connection (Escalas & Bettman, 2003)
1. [piped text for influencer name]‘s brand reflects who I am.
2. I can identify with [piped text for influencer name]’s brand.
3. I feel a personal connection to [piped text for influencer name]’s brand.
4. I (can) use [piped text for influencer name]’s brand to communicate who I am to other people.
5. I consider [piped text for influencer name]’s brand to be “me.”
6. I think [piped text for influencer name] helps me become the type of person I want to be.
7. [piped text for influencer name]’s brand suits me well.

Parasocial Attachment (adapted from Russell & Stern, 2006; de Berail et al., 2019)
1. I think [piped text for influencer name] is like an old friend.
2. [piped text for influencer name] makes me feel comfortable, as if I am with a friend.
3. [piped text for influencer name] seems to understand the kinds of things I want to know.
4. I find [piped text for influencer name] to be attractive.
5. I would like to meet [piped text for influencer name] in person.
6. I feel sorry when [piped text for influencer name] makes a mistake.
7. I like to compare my ideas with what [piped text for influencer name] says.

8. While I am looking at [piped text for influencer name]'s content, I feel like I am part of the group.
9. I miss seeing [piped text for influencer name] when [piped text for influencer name] has not posted new content in a while.
10. I see [piped text for influencer name] as a natural, down-to-earth person.
11. I look forward to seeing [piped text for influencer name] in his or her next Instagram post.
12. If [piped text for influencer name] appeared on another influencer's Instagram post, I would want to look at that post.
13. If I saw a story about [piped text for influencer name] in a newspaper or magazine, I would read it.

Psychological Sense of Brand Community (adapted from Carlson, 2008; Swimberghe et al., 2018)
1. I feel strong ties to other followers.
2. I find it very easy to form a bond with other followers.
3. I feel a sense of being connected with other followers.
4. A strong feeling of camaraderie exists between me and other followers.
5. I feel a sense of community with other followers.

Communal-Brand Connection (Keller, 2003)
1. I really identify with people who follow [piped text for influencer name].
2. I feel like I almost belong to a club with other followers of [piped text for influencer name].
3. [piped text for influencer name] is followed by people like me.
4. I feel a deep connection with others who follow [piped text for influencer name].

Materialism (Richins, 2004)
1. I admire people who own expensive homes, cars, and clothes.
2. Some of the most important achievements in life include acquiring material possessions.
3. I don't place much emphasis on the amount of material objects people own as a sign of success.
4. The things I own say a lot about how well I'm doing in life.
5. I like to own things that impress people.
6. I try to keep my life simple, as far as possessions are concerned.
7. The things I own aren't all that important to me.
8. Buying things gives me a lot of pleasure.
9. I like a lot of luxury in my life.
10. I put less emphasis on material things than most people I know.
11. I have all the things I really need to enjoy life.
12. My life would be better if I owned certain things I don't have.
13. I wouldn't be any happier if I owned nicer things.
14. I'd be happier if I could afford to buy more things.
15. It sometimes bothers me quite a bit that I can't afford to buy all the things I'd like.

Intention to Share Life Experience on Social Media (Barasch et al., 2018)
1. When you undergo life experiences (such as eating out, going to a concert, traveling, etc.), do you usually take photos of yourself and/or have someone take photos of you during the experience? (Yes/No)
2. Please rank the following reasons for taking photos in order of how often the reason applies, with 1 being "most often" and 4 being "least often."
I take photos of life experiences for myself (personal memories).
I take photos of life experiences to post on social media (with other people).
I take photos of life experiences with a different goal in mind (neither for myself nor to share).
I take photos of life experiences without any particular goal in mind.

Intention to Share a Product Purchase on Social Media (Barasch et al., 2018)
1. When you purchase products (such as jewelry, clothing, etc.), do you usually take photos of yourself and/or have someone take photos of you with the product? (Yes/No)
2. Please rank the following reasons for taking photos in order of how often the reason applies, with 1 being "most often" and 4 being "least often."
I take photos of the product for myself (personal memories).
I take photos of the product to post on social media (with other people).
I take photos of the product with a different goal in mind (neither for myself nor to share).
I take photos of the product without any particular goal in mind.

Follower Count and Instagram Handles (self-developed)
1. How many followers does [piped text for influencer name] have on Instagram?
2. Please enter [piped text for influencer's name]'s Instagram handle.
3. How many people do you follow on Instagram?
4. How many followers do you have on Instagram?

Activity Frequency (Lin et al., 2018)
1. How frequently do you post on Instagram?

Average time spent on Instagram daily in the past week (Lin et al., 2018)
1. Considering your Instagram activity in the past week, what is the average amount of time you spent on Instagram on a given day?

Demographics (self-developed)
1. Of which gender do you identify?
2. Please enter the year you were born.
3. What is the highest level of education you have currently completed?
4. What is your annual household income?

APPENDIX C

HUMAN USE APPROVAL LETTERS

LOUISIANA TECH
UNIVERSITY

MEMORANDUM

OFFICE OF SPONSORED PROJECTS

TO: Dr. Laura Flurry and Ms. Juliann Allen

FROM: Dr. Richard Kordal, Director of Intellectual Property & Commercialization (OIPC)
rkordal@latech.edu

SUBJECT: HUMAN USE COMMITTEE REVIEW

DATE: February 15, 2019

In order to facilitate your project, an EXPEDITED REVIEW has been done for your proposed study entitled:

"Exploring User Perceptions of Instagram "Likes" Influencers, Influencer Content and Follower Communities"

HUC 19-072

The proposed study's revised procedures were found to provide reasonable and adequate safeguards against possible risks involving human subjects. The information to be collected may be personal in nature or implication. Therefore, diligent care needs to be taken to protect the privacy of the participants and to assure that the data are kept confidential. Informed consent is a critical part of the research process. The subjects must be informed that their participation is voluntary. It is important that consent materials be presented in a language understandable to every participant. If you have participants in your study whose first language is not English, be sure that informed consent materials are adequately explained or translated. Since your reviewed project appears to do no damage to the participants, the Human Use Committee grants approval of the involvement of human subjects as outlined.

Projects should be renewed annually. ***This approval was finalized on February 14, 2019 and this project will need to receive a continuation review by the IRB if the project continues beyond February 14, 2020.*** **ANY CHANGES** to your protocol procedures, including minor changes, should be reported immediately to the IRB for approval before implementation. Projects involving NIH funds require annual education training to be documented. For more information regarding this, contact the Office of Sponsored Projects.

You are requested to maintain written records of your procedures, data collected, and subjects involved. These records will need to be available upon request during the conduct of the study and retained by the university for three years after the conclusion of the study. If changes occur in recruiting of subjects, informed consent process or in your research protocol, or if unanticipated problems should arise it is the Researchers responsibility to notify the Office of Sponsored Projects or IRB in writing. The project should be discontinued until modifications can be reviewed and approved.

Please be aware that you are responsible for reporting any adverse events or unanticipated problems.

MEMORANDUM

TO: Ms. Julieann Allen and Dr. Laura Flurry

FROM: Dr. Richard Kordal, Director, Office of Intellectual Property & Commercialization (OIPC)
rkordal@latech.edu

SUBJECT: Human Use Committee Review

DATE: February 3, 2020

RE: Approved Continuation of Study HUC 19-072 REN21

TITLE: **"Acquiring Experiences: An Investigation of the Materialist in Liquid Consumption"**

HUC 19-072 REN21

The above referenced study has been approved as of February 3, 2020 as a continuation of the original study that received approval on February 14, 2019. **This project will need to receive a continuation review by the IRB if the project, including collecting or analyzing data, continues beyond February 3, 2021.** Any discrepancies in procedure or changes that have been made including approved changes should be noted in the review application. Projects involving NIH funds require annual education training to be documented. For more information regarding this, contact the Office of University Research.

You are requested to maintain written records of your procedures, data collected, and subjects involved. These records will need to be available upon request during the conduct of the study and retained by the university for three years after the conclusion of the study. If changes occur in recruiting of subjects, informed consent process or in your research protocol, or if unanticipated problems should arise it is the Researchers responsibility to notify the Office of Research or IRB in writing. The project should be discontinued until modifications can be reviewed and approved.